Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 STUDY FOCUS

This study has developed out of an increasing awareness that many teachers in early childhood settings are struggling to deal with the effects of the rapidly changing lifestyles of the young children in their care. Through reflective observation and collegial discussions, it had become apparent that today’s child has a far more complex social and economic lifestyle than the child of the 1960s and 1970s. It also became apparent that an already overcrowded school curriculum now had to absorb this rapidly increasing number of complexities. Colleagues expressed a growing lack of confidence in their own teaching ability, generally believing themselves to be inadequately prepared for major adjustments to their traditional pedagogy. It was their perception that the combination of larger class sizes, children’s differing and more complex lifestyles and values and the external pressures placed on them as teachers had hampered their efforts to create effective learning programs of the future.

This study is positioned in a hypothetical question from the writing of Dr Hedley Beare (2001) Creating the Future School, which challenges teachers of the future to adequately provide a suitable learning program for a five year old child ‘of the future’:

Are you confident that you can design a curriculum which will equip me to live in my [futuristic] world? (Beare, 2001: p.17).

1.1.1 Study context

In 2004 a comprehensive professional development training program, REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers (REAL) was organised by the Department for Employment, Education and Training, Northern Territory (DEET, NT). All early childhood professionals teaching in NT Preschools and Transition classes were obliged to attend REAL at some stage within the next three years. REAL was a three day professional development program designed by officers of DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division (Appendix 1). The outcomes of this program were:

- To identify and develop common understandings about the skills, processes and advantages of building strong relationships and partnerships
• To identify and develop common understandings about the skills, processes and advantages of creating effective and high-achieving learning environments
• To explore pathways of individual research and learning to optimise relationships and partnerships in own work context
• To use own learning preferences and meta-cognitive processes to optimise own learning.

Topics explored during the three day period of REAL were:
• Day 1 – exploring relationships and partnerships
• Day 2 – building effective relationships, partnerships and creating quality environments
• Day 3 – creating quality environments

During the three days of REAL participants:
• considered the major skills that young learners would need for the next fifteen to twenty years
• visited Preschool programs considered by the organisers to demonstrate best [early childhood] practice
• commenced a personal action learning project to evaluate and demonstrate their own learning and the change or impact this learning had on their practice

Prior to attendance at REAL participants were requested to read Chapter 2 of Beare (2001) Creating the future school. Participants were expected to attend a supplementary three-day REAL professional development training program later in the year of their first attendance. This supplementary program included:
• exploring active learning approaches
• [considering] rich active learning environments
• catering for quality learning experiences (Appendix 2).

Regular professional development training is encouraged in the NT through DEET, (NT) in recognition of the view that teacher participation in professional development improves the quality of teaching and therefore enhances student learning and
achievement. Generally speaking, time and funding to facilitate teacher professional development through their attendance at conferences, seminars and programs run by DEET (NT) or other suitable professional organisations is allocated to all teachers in the NT.

From 2004 to 2007 attendance for all NT early childhood teachers at the REAL professional development program was given priority and thus adequate administrative monies and time were allocated to ensure that all Preschool and Transition class teachers would attend REAL within a three year period. It was assumed, by both those teachers attending and the DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers organising REAL professional development program, that all teachers would benefit from their attendance and that their pedagogical and educational environments would be effectively enhanced (Curriculum Services Division, 2005).

The professional development training program REAL was a DEET (NT) initiative, as one component of its response to the findings of the Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development and Education Committee’s review and recommendations (OECD, 2001). This review presented global recommendations for considering how policies, services, families and communities could best support young children’s development and learning.

In 2003, the NT Education Advisory Council was established to address the OECD, 2001 recommendations. The resultant Early Years Framework was developed as a comprehensive framework for advising DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers on future early childhood education policy matters. A draft curriculum document, Strong Beginnings: Supporting Best Practice in the Early Years (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2005) was made available for early childhood teachers to review. The intended design of Strong Beginnings (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2005) was to action initiatives across all agencies responsible for providing quality early childhood care and education in the NT.
One initiative accompanying the introduction of the *Early Years Framework* and *Strong Beginnings: Supporting Best Practice in the Early Years* was a proposed *Age of Entry Trial*, which would effectively lower the entry age into Preschool and Transition class for all NT school children. A key factor in the establishment of the *Age of Entry Trial* was a directive from the Australian Government, 2003, proposing that a single age of intake into school be established for all young children attending Australian schools (Curriculum Services Division, 2005). This policy was to be mandated by the year 2010. The Australian Government was responding in similar fashion to the OECD 2001 review findings. DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers explained the introduction of the *Age of Entry Trial* policy as their response to the Federal Government’s directive in the following statement,

> In expectation of national requirements being mandated by 2010, the Age of Entry Trial has been developed to ensure NT schools are on track with respect to the Australian Government’s requirements for all states and territories to move to a nationally consistent single intake policy for Transition [first school class for entry in NT schools] (Curriculum Services Division, 2005).

Based on the above Australian Government 2010 mandate, DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers proposed an *Age of Entry* (school intake) policy, believing this policy to be appropriate and suitable across the NT. Hence an *Age of Entry Trial* was implemented, in which children aged three and a half years of age would be eligible to attend Preschool and children aged four and a half years of age would be eligible to attend the first formal year of school. Stage one of this *Age of Entry Trial*, commenced in January, 2004, originally in ten Preschools and Transition classes across the NT, with progressively more schools participating over the following three years, until the trial’s completion in 2007.

The *Age of Entry Trial*, the development of the *Early Years Framework* and the provision of the professional development training program *REAL*, were collectively established to address early childhood education and care issues in the NT, presumably to assist early years teachers resituate their classroom practices in the proposed paradigm of new learning that would be involved in future early childhood pedagogy. It became progressively obvious to the early childhood teachers in NT Preschools and Transition classes (the first year of formal schooling) that participation in the *Early Years Framework* and *Age of Entry Trial* was a requirement, not an
option. It was also a requirement for these teachers to attend the specified professional development training program, REAL.

This study addresses the perspectives of one group of teachers about the effectiveness of the professional development training program, REAL to fulfil its intended purposes of supporting and promoting quality early childhood teaching practice after the introduction of the *Age of Entry Trial*.

### 1.2 STUDY STRUCTURE

#### 1.2.1 Literature Review

It was found during the Literature Review that there is considerable debate over the contemporary teacher’s ability to operate harmoniously or effectively in today’s rapidly changing social, generational and educational climate. The culture of each of these climates is addressed through future schooling research, as are the expressed concerns of today’s teachers in relation to the implementation of changes that will affect their current and future teaching practice.

Issues of society apparently hurrying children through their early childhood years, technology and media infiltrating young children’s lives and the move toward earlier formal schooling programs are also addressed in this study. These societal issues are considered through past and current landscapes of early childhood education from international, national and local perspectives. The represented perspective of this study is that of the NT, Australia.

The main focus of this literature review is the analysis of the empirical literature that informs the study. Further, the literature around educational change underpinning the debate about quality early childhood programs and a proposed earlier age of entry into schooling for Preschool and Transition class children is examined. The establishment of a professional development training program, REAL was initiated by DEET (NT) to support and promote quality practice opportunities for early childhood teachers in the NT.
This study is centred on the effectiveness of this professional development training program to fulfil its intended purpose, of supporting and promoting quality early childhood teaching practice. Thus the guiding question for this thesis is:

What are the perspectives of early childhood teachers on their teaching practice, commensurate with recent professional development course outcomes of creating effective learning environments of the future?

1.2.2 Research Methodology

This study formulates a set of theoretical propositions regarding the perspectives of early childhood school teachers on how they have managed changes to their teaching practice in the context of their exposure to specified professional development training. It is positioned in terms of early childhood school teachers’ perspectives, encompassing what these teachers think, believe, predict, conceptualise and evaluate with regard to the value of one form of professional development training and the resulting actions, orientations, dispositions and attitudes they adopt.

It is an interpretive study, embedded within a methodological framework based on the key principles of symbolic interactionism. Its ontology is based on the recognition of a changing reality within the teaching profession and therefore addresses those changing realities. This study’s epistemological position is embedded in constructionism, which claims that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Constructed meanings of the perceived complexities within the current pedagogical system and the perceived need for teachers to be agents of change are defined and explored.

The paradigm which best informs this research is interpretivism, which examines the meanings that the phenomena attached to changing realities have for early childhood teachers in their everyday classroom settings and teaching practice. An interpretivist approach effectively brings together the teacher and the society in which he or she operates and provides a way for actions to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices.

The interpretivist approach, through its emphasis on interpretation of human behaviour, can be directly associated with qualitative research methods, one of
several research methods which focus on the study of human behaviour. The interpretivist approach is identified as one of several research approaches within the field of social sciences, symbolic interactionism (O’Donoghue, 2006). This study is designed to analyse, interpret and explain early childhood teachers’ perspectives on their teaching practice after their engagement in a specified professional training program that was intended to assist them in managing change.

Purposive sampling is used in this study as the most appropriate method of gaining information-rich samples which purposefully focus on the identified issues of the study. It is significant to note that of the seventy or more personal invitations forwarded to all participants of the REAL professional development program through electronic mail, only the nine participants of this study volunteered to be interviewed. These participants, with a collective number of more than two hundred and fifty years of teaching in the NT or elsewhere in Australia, represent a significant number of experienced early childhood teachers, for whom dealing with social, generational and educational complexities was becoming increasingly problematic.

Data were collected from early childhood teachers through face-to-face interviews, after their three-day attendance at REAL. In the individual face-to-face interviews, teachers elaborated on perceived changes in their teaching practice in relation to the professional development training program in which they had participated. They also articulated their thoughts on how they had or had not managed to make changes in their pedagogy.

The process of transcribing, coding, analysing, categorising and identifying theoretical propositions of this study included categorising interview transcript data by coding, re-arranging this data to define and develop theoretical concepts and identifying connections between categories and themes.

The recurring themes of this study, the ‘meaningful segments to interpret’, included teacher recognition and acceptance or rejection of the purpose of the REAL professional development program, teacher expectations of a professional development program to meet their pedagogical needs and teacher concerns about addressing future schooling issues in their current teaching practice.
The focus on these more abstract issues and concerns led to the establishment of perspectives and the formulation of five sub-theoretical propositions connecting the categories of descriptive and inferential coding. These sub-theoretical propositions were then embedded into three main interrelated theoretical propositions representing the key perspectives of early years’ teachers regarding their teaching practice in ways commensurate with their recent professional development training.

1.2.3 Theoretical Proposition One Statement
The first of the three interrelated theoretical propositions representing the early years’ teachers key perspectives regarding their teaching practice (commensurate with recent professional development training) revealed that the early childhood teachers approved in principle the policy of a single age of entry into school. The teachers also approved of the specified outcomes of the REAL professional development training program. The first theoretical proposition encapsulates these teachers’ identified feelings of apprehension and resentment towards the inclusive policy of an earlier (than they believed to be appropriate) age of entry into school. The teachers also believed there to be a lack of organisational and financial support accompanying the implementation of this policy.

1.2.4 Theoretical Proposition Two Statement
The second theoretical proposition focuses on the escalation of social and generational changes which pose personal and pedagogical constraints on the early childhood teachers and which influence these teachers’ conceptual interpretations of the commonly used term best practice. The introduction of the Age of Entry policy increased teacher awareness of and concerns about the influence of society’s changing profile on their personal and pedagogical interpretations of the term best practice.

1.2.5 Theoretical Proposition Three
The third theoretical proposition addresses teacher perspectives of the future of schooling and these teachers’ considered levels of commitment to being pedagogy change agents in their early childhood settings, following the implementation of the Age of Entry policy. It also examines the impact of the informed and relevant professional development training program, REAL, on the participants’ ongoing
teaching practice. It was found that the teachers of this study deemed their particular circumstances to influence, either positively or negatively, their perspectives of future schooling and their levels of commitment to being pedagogy change agents.

1.3 CONCLUSION
This study encompasses what teachers think, believe, predict and conceptualise with regard to the value of a specified form of professional development training, namely REAL. The resulting actions, orientations, dispositions and attitudes adopted by the teachers of this study after their attendance at the REAL professional development training program are detailed. Recommendations for policy, practice and further research, with a special focus on the comparison of traditional with contemporary professional development training, conclude this study.

The following chapter, the Literature Review, will address the positioning of the contemporary teacher, in relation to both teacher and school perspectives in the culture of current educational change. It will consider future-world social scenarios and teacher reflections on the realities of the future in global, national and local landscapes. Specific reference is made to an initiative taken by DEET (NT) in developing a professional learning program to assist early years’ teachers deal with futuristic influences on contemporary classroom realities. Future early years’ classroom practice and the effectiveness of professional learning programs specifically designed to assist teachers in assimilating their learning and reshaping their pedagogies, conclude the Literature Review.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The key conceptual premise for this chapter is that content-specific professional development training programs will assist teachers of early childhood education and care programs in the NT. Professional learning will assist these teachers to make sizeable shifts in their practice and reshape their classroom pedagogies. This in turn will enable them to confront and manage change in a time of rapidly reconstituting child and family values, social relationships and lifelong learning expectations.

In this chapter the positioning of the contemporary teacher, in relation to both the teacher and school perspectives, is articulated. The culture of current educational change and its response to future-world social scenarios is then addressed. This is followed by reflections on the realities for teachers in global, national and local landscapes. Specific reference is made to an initiative taken by the NT Government in developing and implementing a professional learning program to assist early years’ teachers deal with some of these contemporary classroom realities. In conclusion, this chapter addresses the hope of the future for early years’ classroom practice, as teachers continue to participate in professional learning programs, assimilate their learning and reshape their pedagogies.

This chapter reviews the literature that informs the study. The literature will be considered in six sections. In the first section the perspectives of contemporary teachers and the perspectives of the administrators and societies served by the contemporary school system are outlined. The second section of this chapter examines the culture of educational change and the challenges posed by such change. Teacher acceptance and management, or rejection of change and reflections on the term ‘reality’ as it applies to the contemporary teacher are considered in the third section. This is followed by two further sections, which address the landscape of professional development initiatives in early childhood education, followed by perspectives on international and national early childhood landscapes. The conclusion considers arguments, decisions and preferences for early childhood educational learning and professional development programs of the future.
2.2 THE CONTEMPORARY TEACHER

2.2.1 Teacher Perspectives

A fundamental part of education system performance outcomes is the ability of its teachers to harmoniously and effectively operate the machine called school (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton and Kleiner, 2000). Today there seems to be considerable debate as to whether teachers are operating this machine either harmoniously or effectively. Global trends are creating unrest and confusion amongst these teachers who regard themselves as educational leaders. This perspective is reflected in Beare (2001: p.11):

During the past decade while I was attending conferences, workshops and talks on the future of schooling, I found myself hearing the same things being said over and over again. They were predictions from a wide variety of experts about the trends shaping the world into which this generation of schoolchildren will proceed and there was a great amount of agreement and common ground.

Society’s expectations for schools are changing significantly. Teaching roles have become more complex as government, society and parent ideologies of education make greater demands. The common ground referred to by Beare (2001) suggests that teachers locally, nationally and internationally are experiencing and expressing feelings of unrest and confusion in a period of unprecedented global educational change.

Senge et al. (2000: p.50) suggest that education needs a fundamental shift of mind to create ‘ensembles of new ideas and approaches’ in which teachers can experience a level of pedagogical change and regain confidence in their teaching abilities. Many teachers have become indecisive about continuing in teaching as their lifelong preferred career. The Australian Education Union (AEU) has expressed its concerns over the current lack of teacher retention, maintaining that:

Teaching is no longer seen as a lifetime career. There is an acceptance that many will leave having taught for less than a decade and that people will come into teaching ‘mid-career’ i.e. after experience in another form of work (Australian Education Union, 2004: p.5).

Work and career satisfaction is of major significance for teachers who daily face the overwhelming task of teaching children whose agendas appear to conflict with their own. The concept of “teachers make the difference” (sometimes seen on teacher
‘Thank you’ cards, wall plaques and magnets) seems very elusive to many teachers today. Teachers are experiencing deteriorating levels of concentration, manners, learning potential and acceptable behaviour of the children in their classrooms. The fact that this is a universal dilemma is borne out by Palmer (2006) who refers to reports from many thousands of teachers around the UK, USA, Japan and other developed countries of a steady deterioration in the behaviour and learning potential of children in their classes “who are not as well behaved or as well equipped to learn as they were in the past” (Palmer, 2006: p.6).

Palmer continues to argue that children increasingly have greater problems focusing their concentration, exercising self-restraint and considering other people’s needs and interests. Many teachers in contemporary classrooms would readily agree with Palmer when she alludes to distractible, impulsive children being difficult to teach (Palmer, 2006).

Another major problem argued by several authors (Bussey, 2004; Connell, 2002; Leach, 1994) is that, as children’s behaviour gets worse, teachers are required to spend more time and energy on behaviour management. Teachers reported that a decline in manners and respect for adults, with general “cheekiness” and backchat making day-to-day classroom management more demanding. For these teachers there were:

[M]any more incidences of student rule breaking, violence and bullying, all of which required disciplinary action and took up valuable teaching time (Palmer, 2006: p.9).

This appears to be creating unrest amongst teachers, which in turn leads to disenchantment with themselves as professional educators and educational leaders.

Elkind (2001) suggests that teacher levels of overwhelming stress appear to result from rapid social change and constantly rising expectations of teachers to produce acceptable student achievement results. Today’s teachers are attempting to meet increasing demands of changing global, national and local organisations, cultures and environments. Within the school context, leadership paradigms are shifting and different conceptions of teaching are being generated at different levels within the post-industrial school organisation (Senge et al. 2000).
2.2.2 School Perspectives

In an attempt to unravel and address the varying levels of current teacher unrest, dissatisfaction and stress, it is necessary to consider what school, schooling and learning are and what they should look like. Of all the institutions within society which influence and direct children’s learning pathways, the school survives and remains as the one institution with which every member of society will come into contact for a period of time. Senge et al. (2000) suggest that schooling is all about socialising each generation into a life of a nation, while Walker (2005: p.53) calls school a “microcosm of society”.

Senge et al. (2000) define education as a primary institution that transmits values, norms and expectations to people on a large scale. It is Senge’s belief that schools which value student skills, sensibilities, attitudes and qualities and in which teachers, students, parents, communities and societies continue to rethink and reshape their own impressions of schools and schooling establishes sound prospects for a sustainable future culture.

Abbott (1995: p.2) considers learning to be essentially a social activity, relying on knowledge *construction* more than knowledge *transfer*. He argues that conventional schooling emphasises the individual and the individual’s accumulation of abstract knowledge. Abbott (1995) believes that the very foundation of community existence rests in young people being motivated to belong to groups that value a particular kind of knowledge and therefore schools and education are culturally embedded institutions.

Senge et al. (2000: p.32) claim that industrial-age schools of today are “caught in extraordinary cross-fires of change”. These authors allude to the school as a machine in which children experience fragmented learning through a system that is based on maintaining control. In schools founded on the industrial-age school model, claims Senge, it is the teacher’s job to control the students, the administrator’s to control the teachers and the school board’s to maintain control over the system as a whole.

Teachers, administrators and boards can easily become the operators of the machine called school (Senge et al. 2000: p.44).
There is significant positive correlation between the thinking of Senge et al. (2000) and Bussey (2004), for Bussey (2004: p.331) believes that “schools and schooling are at a crossroads… the defining metaphor is that of the machine”. Bussey (2004) identifies a sense of tension and incongruence that permeates the nature of teachers’ work today. He recognises school as authoritarian in the present context, but expresses hope that in the future, schools will offer students an escape from such restrictive experiences.

These are not new, twenty-first century concepts. Senge et al. (2000) and Bussey’s (2004) statements reinforce the sentiments of Dewey (1963) who believed strongly that schools should reflect the society in which children would eventually work. Further, Freire (1972) argued some time ago that teaching should be relevant to the society in which the classroom and school were located. Elliott (2006) in her Australian Education Review paper, Early Childhood Education: Pathways to quality and equity for all children claims that early childhood teachers are coming face to face with increasingly complex social environments that challenge the traditional role of teachers as they are currently positioned in schools. Given the aforementioned critique of what schools, schooling and learning are and should look like (Senge et al. 2000), many schools now seem to be out of step with the very society in which the children live and in which they will possibly be employed. Just as society has changed, so too have the needs of that society’s children (McCain and Jukes, 2001).

Industrial age schooling was predictable and standardised. Industrial society with its distinctive class structure, is portrayed by McCain and Jukes (2001: p.25) as having ‘stamped out a look and feel for life that was almost identical for all [within that class]’. However, in industrial age society there were different expectations for different classes, including the distinct classes of bosses and labourers, noblemen and peasants.

According to McCain and Jukes (2001) people born before 1970 (and a significant number of today’s teachers belong to this group) have a worldview, an understanding of society and perspectives that are vastly different from those of today’s young people. The world they experienced was based on an industrial model of thinking. It
did not teach people how to integrate smart electronic devices into their lives or how to get and interpret new visual information. Students of the past did not learn about the implications of instantaneous global communication and, in short, the life they experienced did not equip them to handle the world we now see unfolding (McCain and Jukes, 2001).

The life of the child at school is bifurcated by these differing worldviews. It is the contention of this thesis that teachers can no longer base their pedagogy or professional learning on the former model of thinking. Current authors (Newby, 2005; McCain and Jukes, 2001; Senge et al. 2000; Beare and Slaughter, 1993) call for teachers to make a shift from a past-orientation to a futures-orientation. Further, it is a consensus of several authors (Palmer, 2006; Smith, 2006; Walker, 2005; Bussey, 2004) that teachers can no longer operate under the assumption that society in all its facets remains unchanged. There is ample evidence (Newby, 2005; Australian Education Union, 2004; Elliott, 2006) to suggest that, for those teachers who continue to think and work as they always have done, greater difficulty, conflict and upheaval will persist and increase. McCain and Jukes (2001) suggest that teachers are now operating in a system that has rapidly outgrown itself. These authors believe it is simplistic to believe that teachers need only make a few adjustments, re-organise specific programs and practices, re-group or create more committees with more agendas, as they have done in the past, in order to move into this futures-orientation. McCain and Jukes (2001) suggest that making incremental adjustments to an industrial paradigm will not be helpful in a society which is rapidly changing and a future that is “zooming ahead at the speed of lightning” (McCain and Jukes, 2001: p.31).

Elliott (2006: p.33) advocates that, of all teachers and educators, it is the early childhood teachers who must be most energised to confront and manage these changes, for, “more than most, they are confronted by the immediacy of social dynamics because of their close relations with families”. This places a huge demand on early childhood teachers to re-conceptualise the nature of schooling and to make significant shifts in their teaching and learning, as suggested by McCain and Jukes (2001) the process of which remains unclear and contested in the literature.
2.3 THE CULTURE OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Implicit in this call for early childhood teachers to confront and manage change is the need for schools to be more responsive to the social world in which it exists. Connell (2002: p.13) claims that teachers need to recognise the impact of “the learning that already occurs … outside the classroom”. This implicit learning often has more relevance and meaning to today’s children than any explicit classroom learning. This is the challenge for teachers: to facilitate greater connectedness between classroom learning and that of the real world. McCain and Jukes (2001) suggest that teachers would do well to reconsider their work in the realms of student engagement and embrace the concept of the increasingly disposable nature of information that is now readily available through the World Wide Web.

A prominent question for early childhood teachers today is reflected in Palmer’s 2006 research:

Why … in all the most advanced and advantaged countries of the world, should [young] children be growing less and less able to exercise self-control and more difficult to teach? (Palmer, 2006: p.10)

This question recognises the 2003 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores that in some of the most developed countries, whose citizens are wealthier, healthier and more privileged than ever before, children show greater detachment from and higher levels of discontent with the institution called school every year (Masters, 2005). Masters (2005: p.12) claims that, over the past decade, PISA achievement levels in Australia remained largely static while achievement levels in other countries, including previously lower achieving countries such as Hong Kong, Hungary, Estonia and Belgium had improved significantly. Increasing levels of poor concentration and less self-restraint amongst Australian children appear to present paramount problems for today’s teachers. Palmer (2006) compares the upbringing of twenty-first century children to a minefield, where parents:

pick their way gingerly through the sound bites – junk food, sugar highs, couch-potato kids, pester power, battery children, electronic babysitters, techno brats and so on – but with a distinct shortage of reference points. … In less than two decades, technology has transformed our homes: laptops, email, the worldwide
web; cable, satellite and digital TV, camcorders, DVD; computer games, PlayStations, iPods; mobile phones, text messaging, camphones (Palmer, 2006: p.12).

Palmer (2006) claims that family breakdown is now commonplace and that fast-changing workplace and increasing workforce pressures continue to impact negatively on single parents. There are now far fewer extended family groups than there were before (Newby, 2005; Bussey, 2004; Beare, 2001). Old certainties have gone and parents and children alike are living in a period of moral relativism. These changes place the school of today under great pressure. Beare and Slaughter (1993) believe that several rivals compete for the young child’s attention, including media, ICT, marketing and peer pressure.

A major rival is television, a means whereby every day of the year a consistent (even if predominantly crass) value system is promulgated to the whole of society. Other rivals for the attention of the young are popular music, computer games and sport. On the horizon we see virtual reality and a whole new constellation of surrogate worlds rapidly approaching. With them come a range of new and challenging problems (Beare and Slaughter, 1993: pp. 99-100).

Beare and Slaughter’s observations are reflected in a recent UK study by two former media executives, Teresa Orange and Louise Flynn, in their book, *The Media Diet for Kids* (2005). The premise behind this book is the belief that “the screen” (including computers, computer games, mobile phones, iPods and play stations) is one of the most difficult things to control. The authors contend that a balance of time spent ‘at the screen” is a desperately hot issue that must be confronted if a subsequent host of attendant ills are to be avoided (Orange and Flynn, 2005). It is in this context of competing rivals and tensions that teachers struggle to make sense of their professional world.

Beare (2001), in a future-world scenario created a five year old ‘child of the future’, Angelica, who asks her teachers many questions about her future and who confidently expresses her observations of the world she lives in. She recounts:

> Computers are changing the way my schooling is arranged. We have access to an enormous amount of information and we can consult almost any library and government department in the world. We can find out things through the computer that even our teachers know little about. So we have a different view about knowledge and studying (Beare, 2001: p.16).
Such challenges place heavy demands on teachers to reconstitute their traditional work practices to be more responsive to the contemporary child.

Advances in communication and global links in education have presented new and exciting, yet increasingly complex challenges to individuals and communities. Information communication technology has invaded offices, schools and homes alike. McCain and Jukes (2001) suggest that all facets of society are surrounded by astounding developments in communications, computers, entertainment, household appliances, product designing and manufacturing. Such developments present enormous challenges to professional and national survival. For those teachers who have lived most of their childhood and teaching career years prior to the emergence of electronic technology, it may be difficult to accommodate or even understand new developments. McCain and Jukes (2001) further claim that in the past, technological development was very slow and the technologies developed were not particularly powerful relative to those emerging today. These authors claim that the rate of change that humanity experienced during the 50-year span from 1940 to 1990 will accelerate in the next few years, creating an “unprecedented situation of rapid development … in human history” (McCain and Jukes, 2001: p.23).

Many NT teachers trained before 1990 acknowledge their current struggle to adapt and modify technological understandings, knowledge and skills bases, in order to meet the changes racing towards them. Smith (2006) in a well-researched picture-story book for young children likens the current world to a village. Smith defines earth as:

A crowded place [which] is getting more crowded all the time. As of January 1, 2005, the world’s population was 6 billion, 400 million. Twenty-four countries have more than 50 million people. Eleven countries each have more than 100 million people. China has 1 billion, 300 million, while India has nearly 1 billion, 100 million people (Smith, 2006: p.7).

He asks his young readers to imagine that the whole of earth’s population is a village of only 100 people, in which each person would represent about 64 million people from the real world. Smith (2006) encourages his readers to be passionate about their world and to acquire and develop their passions for travel, landscapes, exploration, culture and reading. These are not exactly the subjects one is used to seeing in a teacher’s curriculum framework and daily program. Smith recognises that it is
today’s child who will solve world crises in thirty years’ time. This places greater responsibility on teachers to reshape their work and to provide appropriate ‘futures-learning’ experiences for children.


Research conducted by the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) (2001) supports claims of other researchers in the wider area of spiralling effects of information technology in the learning process. In the publication *New Learning: A Charter for Education in Australia* (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2001: pp.5-6) it is suggested that today’s information technology explosion will dramatically shape the future of education, that a “new basics” is emerging and that technology will become central to all learning. The researchers contrast ‘new learning’ with “old learning”. Old learning is here characterised as fixating on content knowledge, taking place in educational institutions and being limited in the age spanned. Old learning will be replaced with the development of flexible learning, in which learners will be capable of taking charge of their own learning. This learning can take place in any context, with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) playing an important part (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2001). Thus teachers are being called upon to resituate their classroom practices in the paradigm of ‘new learning’ and this may be problematic for an aging profession.

In contrast, Australian Education Union (AEU) researcher Caroline Rance (2006) believes that much of the writing about the future and its many dramatic changes appear only to have created conflict and discord amongst educators, parents and societies in which these education systems exist and operate. Rance (2006: p.10) claims that such “likely changes are frequently exaggerated”, as are claims that “adapting to the future” needs “a seismic shift and complete revolution in practice”. Whilst Rance (2006) does admit that there will be big changes in coming decades, she
would debate the extent to which these changes require major change to current practice. So within the literature it is evident that key stakeholders in education have not achieved consensus concerning the problematic nature of education or teaching. This confluence of differing points of view concerning the shaping of the future creates even greater tension and uncertainty for teachers.

There is no denying that teachers today are caught up in a fast-moving society. In the developed world and especially among economically successful countries, young children are being hurried from activity to activity in society’s urge to push them along their education path (Palmer, 2006). Teachers are required to ensure that these often distractible, impulsive children gain the prescribed literacy and numeracy levels. The AEU defines some of these differences and their effects on teachers and teaching:

Greater expectations and academic pressures are resulting in more tutoring; more structured extra curricular activities and less free time. More students live in cities, with greater noise levels and less secure environments. There is much more commercial pressure on children through the media and computer games, which regards children primarily as consumers (Australian Education Union, 2004: p.8).

The AEU (Australian Education Union, 2004) recognises that these issues affect the ability of children to learn, impacting on a teacher’s day-to-day practice and making the task of teaching more difficult. McCain and Jukes (2001: p.113) make several pertinent observations and suggestions in an attempt to connect teaching and the realities of the past to the radical, continually unfolding changes of the future. They define a new role for teachers, who must recognise that “the traditional system has been set up to prepare students for a world that no longer exists”. Teachers have never before been asked to make such significant changes so rapidly and many already believe their job to be extremely stressful and overloaded.

In an ideal, real world, McCain and Jukes (2001) suggest that teachers will need to learn to live their lives like “quarterbacks”, anticipating the future, doing their own trend analysis and consequently beginning to visualise some of the future-world possibilities. These authors claim that teacher ability to do this is crucial to keeping the curriculum of the future relevant. As teachers begin to practise this, they will not
only be staying on top of change; they will also be providing a good model for how to deal with change.

The question which must be addressed is: ‘How and in what contexts will early childhood teachers make the changes necessary to ensure success in their current and future teaching practice?’ The AEU (Australian Education Union, 2004: p.8) suggests that teachers “educate and prepare … students for [an evolving] life” rather than make any “seismic or revolutionary change” to their current practice. An approach to professional learning which recognises the past and builds on the future is much preferred by the AEU and offers a more viable approach to reshaping teachers’ work. In keeping with the AEU findings, the simplest and most practical way to effect educational change would be for teachers to address the realities and relevance of learning in today’s classroom and to consider their abilities and the responsibilities involved in creating such learning (Australian Education Union, 2004). Implicit in the AEU findings is a determinate association between teachers addressing these issues on a personal and professional basis and the invigoration of teachers to reshape their work and take significant steps towards becoming agents of educational change.

2.4 WHAT IS REAL?
McCain and Jukes (2001) believe that all educators must first accept the reality of change and then learn to manage it to its full potential, given the increasing awareness of the rate of change that humanity is now experiencing. Five year old Angelica, child of the future’s questions to her teachers, “So, do you know what to teach me? Do you know what I need to learn? And do you know how to teach me? Are you confident that you can design a curriculum which will equip me to live in my world?” (Beare, 2001. p. 17), requires a confident reply if the teaching profession is to gain credibility in the community.

It becomes necessary to define the future (but how – as it is by definition unknown) or to develop attitudes and perspectives which are able to adapt to changes and cope with a changing future confidently. In available literature, many references are made in describing our current world, with terms such as electronic world, developed world, complex world and technological world (Newby, 2005; McCain and Jukes, 2001; Second Life Virtual Worlds, 2007) causing anxiety amongst teachers who may
perceive that they belong to either, or, neither or both. Some refer to *the real world* which causes even greater confusion, given the dictionary definition of *real* to be: “true, genuine, not counterfeit, artificial or imitation” (Macquarie Dictionary, 3rd edition, 1998).

For teachers today, the complexity of the current world and the increasing problematic education scene is very real (McCain and Jukes, 2001). Varying levels of apprehension exist for teachers who believe that the world they experienced in the past did not prepare them for the integration of electronic devices, or for the interpretation of a wealth of new visual information. McCain and Jukes (2001) suggest that educators wishing to teach in the future education system will need to make significant paradigm shifts. It is their belief that the traditional education system prepared children for a world that no longer exists. Many teachers have not been able to keep up with what Palmer (2006) suggests is an overwhelming acceleration of progress. For these teachers, accessibility to instantaneous global communication can be just as instantaneously inhibited through apprehension and fear. “In a nutshell, our culture has evolved faster than our biology” states Palmer (2006: p.3). Yet the impact of this acceleration of progress demands an ongoing response from teachers who wish to continue to succeed in their chosen profession.

What then defines *real*? From the above perspectives it is an acceptance of the past and an exciting, challenging, persistent, ever-changing forward-looking journey. Velveteen Rabbit (Williams, 1992) asked Skin Horse ‘What is REAL? He was given a somewhat obscure, yet profound and visionary image.

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day … “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out-handle?” “Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s the thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real” “Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit. “Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse…”When you are real, you don’t mind being hurt.” “Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, or bit by bit?” “It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept” (Williams, 1992: p. 12).
Real may not happen all at once, but it cannot take too long. Early childhood educators recognise an urgency to initiate forward-looking changes to children’s lifelong learning.

Perhaps the most subtle and alarming change in the lives of young children is their inability to “show initiative, play alone and/or create experiences for themselves” (Walker, 2005: p.15) or to enjoy a moment of quiet or personal space. Teachers in early childhood programs are especially concerned that the increasing pressure placed on very young children for real learning, synonymous with literacy and numeracy, does not recognise the value of play in the learning process. Collette Tayler, co-author of the major OECD study Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006) stresses the importance of play-based environments for children aged three to four years, where these children learn skills of cooperation and investigation in environments rich in engaging, experimenting, thinking aloud and sharing opportunities. According to Tayler, it is in play-based programs that physical, social, emotional and communication development takes place and self-esteem, confidence and sociability prepare children for the more formalised learning of literacy and numeracy. “We don’t have time to let them play, or to have much free time, we have such a crowded and pushed down curriculum. It’s a lot more stressful on the kids and us these days” (Walker, 2005: p.14) are words that are increasingly heard from teachers in early childhood education and care programs. Schoolifying of the early childhood years is sometimes reinforced by a global focus on readiness for school and the establishment of learning standards for nursery, preschool and kindergarten children (OECD, 2006). The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Level 0 programme claims that a child’s natural learning strategies are developed through play, exploration of the outdoors and freedom of movement, relations and discussions with other children (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006). However, it can be argued that it is virtually impossible to establish universal quality or program standards in early childhood education, as ‘good’ programming criteria reflect the specific social, cultural and educational beliefs about children and education underlying each country’s research base.
The literature reviewed so far indicates that today’s children have far greater social liberties than in past times and yet many children appear unable to enjoy meaningful play. An assumed sophistication has crept into society, destroying the cohesion of children with their parents and others. Marketing now influences children’s play, their friendships and their culture. Australian media commentator Phillip Adams refers to a marketing world which spends billions of dollars on children whose “childhoods are being cynically abbreviated, stolen for profit” (Walker, 2005: p.15). Adams’ comments emphasise the growth of television, video, DVD and other screen-based activity and the movement of children’s play from the playground into the control of the marketing industry. American psychiatrist, Susan Linn claims in Palmer (2006: p.232), that today’s children are growing up in a “marketing maelstrom”. Linn claims that the average child in the USA, UK and Australia sees between 20,000 – 40,000 television commercials per year. Marketing strategist James McNeal (1992) acknowledges children’s unsophisticated unawareness of a marketer’s intent and the potential of the children’s markets.

[Children] have the least and therefore want the most. Consequently they are in a perfect position to be taken (Palmer, 2006: p.230).

One form of society’s response to children’s apparent inability to enjoy meaningful play is the provision of play therapy programs, a city community initiative now being offered in the NT to children from three to eleven years of age (Martin, 2006). In support of the greater liberties allowed children and in a society where once the family was the basic unit, schools now employ counsellors advising children of their rights to leave home when they are thirteen whilst being supported by the Australian taxpayer. For one reader of the Northern Territory News (2006) teenagers today appear to be undermining parenthood in schools, destroying family cohesion, fuelling the family court they invented and promoting sole parenthood and uncontrollable children. This newspaper reader believes that teen anarchy has replaced loving and cohesive self-supporting families in a respectful and friendly society (Northern Territory News, 2006, March).

In an innovative move to curb undesirable teenage behaviours in the Palm City Oasis shopping centre, in Palmerston, NT, the music of Mozart, Verdi and Mendelssohn replaced the mostly pop and rock music previously played throughout the centre. It is
claimed that similar trials conducted at interstate shopping centres had shown impressive decreases in anti-social behaviours when classical music was broadcast (Northern Territory News, 2006, February).

As discussed previously in *The Hurried Child* (Walker, 2005) teachers face the overwhelming task of ensuring that today’s hurried children gain the prescribed literacy and numeracy levels, presumably to prepare them for an unknown future career, or perhaps non-existent jobs. Greater than the learning of language and mathematics fundamentals, it is contended here that there is a need for today’s learners to be critical, creative, technological and informational literate thinkers. Further, it can be argued that young children need to be resilient and co-operative to deal with changing local and global perspectives. Walker (2005: p.19) reminds teachers (especially those in early childhood programs) to value the creation of a world for children and to treasure childhood.

Children need to be allowed to have a childhood … Often the sophisticated or intellectual sounding programs now available to children, move us away from valuing the time we can spend with children and the time they can spend discovering and playing themselves.

There is considerable evidence (Elliott, 2006; Jones and Reynolds, 1992; Bredekamp and Copple, 1997) to support Walker’s claim that children will best learn the co-operation, resilience, creativity, problem-solving and social responsibility needed for learning in the future through being allowed discovering and playing time.

Today’s early childhood educators may well ask, as did the Velveteen Rabbit, “What is real [for them]?” and “Does it hurt?” Teachers who struggle to accept change and new challenges may well cling to a reality that no longer exists, fearing what they foresee to be insurmountable problems and pressures. To the question, “Does it happen all at once?” the answer surely lies in accepting a new reality, moving quickly into the future by beginning to confront the increasing challenges of teaching in tomorrow’s world. Thus if teachers are to engage in successful professional learning, it needs to reflect principles of this type.

2.5 LANDSCAPE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

2.5.1 Quality early childhood care and education
The need to provide quality care and education for very young children outside the home environment has been increasing in direct proportion to the influx of women entering salaried employment over the last thirty years. The provision of quality care programs for children has been under constant international and national review. A significant global review, *The Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care* (ECEC) Policy was documented by the OECD in 1998 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1998). This review focussed on strengthening foundations for lifelong learning. The OECD’s Education Committee deemed the provision of quality care and education to be both necessary and beneficial for young children, their families and the labour market, irrespective of which country participated in the review. The rationale for the review was to strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning. The OECD’s Education Committee considered the provision of care and education for young children as necessary to ensure the access of women to the labour market. It also recognised early childhood development as the foundation of human learning and development (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006).

At the invitation of the OECD Education Committee (1998), the following twelve countries: Australia, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States, participated in the launching of their own country’s review into early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs. The first comparative report, *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care* (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001) which was compiled with the reviews from each of these participating countries, identified eight key elements of successful ECEC policy, including:

- a participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance, appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision and a stable framework and long-term agenda (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006: pp.3-4).

In 2004, following the OECD 2001 comparative report, the Australian Federal Government published a draft *National Agenda for Early Childhood Education* to provide an overarching Australian framework for the building of a cohesive national early childhood education and care system (Organisation for Economic Cooperation
This national agenda is currently being finalised and will require all states and territories to review early childhood care and education policies and establish a nationally consistent single intake (into school) policy. This policy, expected to be mandated by 2010 (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007), influenced curriculum officers of the DEET (NT) to review the age of entry of young children into NT schools, to adopt a three year trial period for a revised age of entry and to provide appropriate professional training for teachers involved in this trial.

In 2007, former Leader of the Opposition for the Australian Federal Government, Kevin Rudd, agreed that Australia’s early childhood education and care programs needed to be reviewed urgently. Rudd admitted that, at the time, Australia’s education programs for young Australians were not successful, when compared to other countries reviewed by the OECD.

If you look at how we best empower the economy of Australia for the future, it means, for example, let’s look at what’s happening in early childhood education. There are 30 countries or so assessed recently by the OECD – this is how we get in at the ground level for educating our young Australians. What we do with four year olds, for example. Guess where we come out of the list of 31 countries which have been assessed and measured by the OECD? Stone bottom last. That is a rolled gold failure. We have to lift the game there (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2007).

Rudd’s 2007 statement reflects that of Tayler, co-author of the OECD report, Starting Strong II (2006), who compares Australia’s lack of focus on the early years with that of other OECD countries. In her comparison, Tayler places Australia “right down near the bottom of the pile” (Eccleston, 2007: pp.33-34).

The NT Education Advisory Council liaised with the Departments of Health, Community Services and Employment, Education and Training to sponsor a report, All Children Have the Best Possible Start: A Framework for Action, using the OECD 2001 report and other international brain and evidence-based, life outcomes research to inform and guide the planning and programming for all community early childhood education and care facilities (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2005). This research report into early care and learning of young children, aged 0 to 8 years, identified this age group to be a period of maximum impact for supporting children to reach their full potential (Fleer, 2000). Eccleston (2007) reported
Australia’s then opposition party spokesman for family and community services, Jenny Macklin, as publically acknowledging Australia’s insufficient support for the parents of early years’ children in providing real learning programs before their child’s entry to school. The *Early Years Framework* (EYF) was subsequently developed by officers of DEET (NT) to guide policy and action in all early childhood education and care settings (Northern Territory Government, 2007).


Included as a recommendation in the *Early Years Framework* and as a response to the Australian Federal Government’s single intake policy mandate, an *Age of Entry Trial* commenced in ten schools and preschools across the NT in January, 2004. Every subsequent year saw more schools undertaking this ‘trial’ (Curriculum Services Division, 2005). It was strongly argued by the authors of *Strong Beginnings* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007) that disadvantaged children or children at risk benefit greatly from early entry into school. In one neurological research, *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods* (Nelson, 2000) it is claimed that the ages zero to five are crucial to a child’s success at school and that the brain is twice as active between birth and five years old as in adult years. Nelson (2000) claims that maximum brain development at this stage of life is therefore crucial to a child’s success at school and in later life (Eccleston, 2007: p.33). This is a contentious research interpretation and must be weighted against international research from OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which compares the quality of educational outcomes globally across educational systems every three years. The PISA results for excellence in educational achievement in Finland are consistently high. In Finland children enter school at the
age of six, which may refute Nelson’s claim that the brain is twice as active between birth and the age of five (Tuovinen, 2008).

2.5.2 Best practice and play-based learning

The term best practice, as expressed in the now mandated NT early childhood curriculum document, Strong Beginnings (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007) has many interpretations. Terms which are frequently associated with best practice are child centred programs, quality programs, play-based programs and developmentally appropriate practice.

The quality of early childhood programs and practices, play-based programs and developmentally appropriate practice, in which play is advocated as a means for children to gain knowledge, have been discussed, researched and promoted with increasing intensity since the early 1900s (Dockett and Fleer, 2003). Yet, defining play still causes a great deal of debate. It was noted, as early as 1948, that in all educational discussion there was scarcely a word upon whose meaning there was so little agreement (Mitchell and Mason, 1948: p.103).

Many definitions of play exist today and no one definition exists that is accepted by all. In their research to ascertain what constitutes purposeful, quality school and childcare systems, McCain and Mustard (1999) claimed a preference for a play-based, problem-solving, developmental approach over the more didactic programs that were becoming more apparent in schools. However, this does not adequately define play. Fromberg (1992: p.43) lists the characteristics of play to include concepts of play being symbolic, meaningful, active, pleasurable, voluntary, rule-governed and episodic.

In their extensive research and studies of children at play, Dockett and Fleer (2003: p.18) claim that children, the players, see play as having fun, whilst work is something they have been told to do. Such studies indicate that children and adults alike continue to express conflicting opinions of their concept of play and work, thereby creating issues of concern in the establishment of play-based learning programs in schools.
A Queensland Government discussion paper, *Towards and Early Years Strategy* (Beattie and Pitt, 2006: p.7), suggested a suitable compromise for active, curious and adventurous young children through the establishment of a “full-time transition or preparatory year with a play-based program” for young children in Queensland schools. “Play-based learning”, as referred to by Beattie and Pitt (2006) is listed in Strong Beginnings (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p.92) as “an active learning approach in which learning experiences are crafted by educators on the basis of their understanding of child-centred needs and strengths”. It is suggested that play provides a natural process through which children learn and that skilled early childhood educators are able to maximise learning opportunities through play.

Italian educator Maria Montessori (1870 – 1953) considered the play of children to be equal to the work of adults, believing that it was the role of early childhood educators to facilitate children’s intellectual, physical and social/emotional development through directed play activities (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p.63). But Elkind (1988) doesn’t agree. He believes the label of children’s play as work to be a mistake. Elkind argues that focusing on children’s play as work has created contrasting views of children’s learning, in which children in Kindergarten or Preschool environments play and children in Reception, Preparatory or Transition class work. In the NT it is becoming increasingly apparent that two contrasting curricula do exist for young children, with growing pressure to replace predominantly play-based programs with what Elkind (1988: p2) calls real work curriculum, which is suggestive of the inclusion of more formal literacy and numeracy activities in the young child’s learning program.

Developmental interactionists such as Piaget viewed children as continually constructing knowledge through a dual process of accommodation and assimilation (Dockett and Fleer, 2003: p.50). When a child imitates an action, developmental interactionists claim this signifies the process of accommodation, or work. By way of contrast, through play, the child incorporates interaction with and influences from the environment to match his or her personal concepts, thereby assimilating, or playing. Elkind (1988: p2) claims that children learn through both accommodation and assimilation, as these processes complement rather than contradict each other. Elkind
regrets that educators have become accustomed to identifying learning with *accommodation* or *work* and to identifying recreation and fun with *assimilation* or play (Elkind, 1988: p.2).

Play represents a relationship between very young children and their stages of development. Child development theories describe children as following patterns, stages or rules of development as they grow and mature (Dockett and Fleer, 2003: p. 112). Mason and Steadman (1997) claim that children are expected to move in a biologically determined pattern along their path to adulthood and that they should follow a set of rules, which in turn assist educators in their contextual understanding of children.

Today a broad range of expectations exists among early childhood educators relevant to defining young children’s activities and levels of progression through the predetermined stages or rules of development. In schools, where often overcrowded curricula, time constraints and confined classroom space issues pose restrictions on the implementation of play-based programs, instructional, developmental and structured play are often confused with the recreational play of young children. Instructional play in many schools can best be described as being based on the educational goals set by the teacher, in which the children, the players themselves, have only minimal control (Dockett and Fleer, 2003: pp.259-260).

Cultural, social and environmental influences impact significantly on the universally accepted traditional view of child development and play. It is suggested in *Strong Beginnings* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p.95) that early childhood educators assist children in acquiring new understandings and developing new skills through the facilitation of meaningful activities that are “relevant to the child”. For very young children, aged 3 to 5 years of age, those cultural, social, environmental, meaningful activities must include play, which is still the child’s major avenue of learning and communication.

In discussing the implications of putting theoretical play-based knowledge into practice Kagan (1992: p.173) claims that the journey from theory to practice is a long and difficult one. Kagan (1992) suggests there are several issues of concern for early
childhood educators in implementing the practice of play into theoretical programs, including the creation of play-suitable environments, influencing adult perspectives, promoting and advocating play and learning and legitimately assessing the children’s learning through play. For some early childhood teachers, play is primarily programmed to meet children’s social and emotional needs; for others the cognitive benefits of play predominate in play-rich programs. Early childhood educators’ views on play determine how they program and facilitate or minimise play opportunities in their settings. Through continued identification of the developmental and learning needs of young children, early childhood educators commit their time and energies to developing appropriate play-based learning programs. In supporting and continually assessing children’s play, early childhood educators affirm the value of play for the young children in their care.

In its advocacy of play-based learning, Strong Beginnings (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p.95) suggests that:

> The early childhood educator uses this knowledge [gained through comprehensive child assessment] to structure the environment, source appropriate materials and set up suitable activities that will support the learning of the child.

A case study tracking one teacher’s process of change about the value of play-based learning, found that very young children developmentally have great difficulty in cooperating, but through play are capable of learning and practising cooperative skills (Bennett, Woods and Rogers, 1997).

A commitment to play underpins many traditional and contemporary approaches to early childhood curriculum. Play-based learning is one approach to children’s learning and is defined in this study as a young child’s acquisition of new understandings and the development of new skills, through informal or structured play activities. This learning occurs through participation in meaningful activities that are relevant to the child, as suggested in the now mandated document *Strong Beginnings* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p.92).

Elliott, (2006) demonstrates that there is a growing body of international evidence relating to the effects of quality settings, experiences and pedagogy on children’s
well-being and developmental outcomes. Although Elliott (2006) alludes to the central role of early childhood practitioners being to promote quality experiences and environments for young children, she stresses that:

There is no nationally agreed position on how early childhood programs should look, or what values, learning experiences or outcomes could and should be expected or promoted (Elliott, 2006: p.3).

Within NT Preschool and Transition classes, program variability is evident, relative to location, practitioner philosophy and chosen educational approaches. These early childhood programs may include Montessori, Steiner or Reggio Emilia traditions, or may represent the Developmentally Appropriate Practice approach, as promoted by the United States-based National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in the 1980s (Elliott, 2006: p.8). The Federalist Paper 2: The Future of Schooling in Australia. A report by the States and Territories (Dawkins, 2007: p.18) makes only a brief statement in relation to early childhood programs, stating that these programs should be of “high quality” in order to determine “children’s attitudes and aptitudes for schooling”.

The term best practice is not specifically described by any of these authors nor was it defined by any of the participants in this study. Yet the term is frequently used by early childhood educators in the NT, including the study participants and is clearly stated in the title of the Trial Draft document, Strong Beginnings: Supporting Best Practice in the Early Years (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2005), which at that time was designed as a support and resource document to be used for planning, programming and teaching by early childhood educators in the NT. It was the 2005 Trial Draft document that was promoted at the time of this study and the participants’ involvement in the professional development training program, REAL.

In 2007, the full early years’ curriculum document was presented to schools, with its revised title, Strong Beginnings: An explicit guide to Quality Practice in the Early Years (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007). This document is embedded in values about each young child’s uniqueness and in the belief that children learn best through play-based learning, thereby giving children the opportunity to make discoveries and connections about their world and to pursue their own interests (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p.95).
Play-based learning is strongly promoted throughout the document and the concept of ‘best practice’ is replaced with quality practice pedagogy. The quality teaching and learning practices detailed in Strong Beginnings (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: pp.47-8) include the promotion and demonstration of active, flexible and diverse relationships, safe, secure and stimulating environments, active child-centred learning and the development of effective language. It was from the four key words or phrases, *relationships and partnerships, environments, active learning approaches* and *language development* that the title, the acronym REAL, (professional development program associated with the introduction of the Age of Entry Trial policy) was designed.

### 2.5.3 Early childhood agendas

Currently, the Australian official *Early Childhood Education and Care* (ECEC) policy has separate and layered auspices which involve Federal, State and Territory governments. It is difficult to determine who is responsible for the overall plan of the development of early childhood education and care programs in Australia, where the current government has three ministers responsible for three sectors of those programs; one for child care, one for education and one for maternity leave. Eccleston (2007: p.35) claims that Australia’s early childhood education and care agenda is “hotchpotch” and believes there to be a:

> [d]og’s breakfast of state, federal and private interests that make it difficult to determine who is responsible’ for Australia’s early childhood education and care agenda (Eccleston, 2007: p.37).

Whilst uniformity in the age of entry into schooling for all Australian children is seen to be desirable by the Australian Federal Government, the exact age for that entry continues to be debated across the Australian states and territories, as does the type of program that will best improve a child’s life-learning outcomes and until recently the number of years required across the states and territories for compulsory schooling. Two disparate, yet connected opinions highlight the separate and layered views that exist amongst educators and politicians in the formulation of a national early childhood and care policy-making process. Walker (2005) questions the urgency being placed on the early entry of a child into the more formal setting of a school, insisting that greater consideration must be given to a child’s readiness for school, rather than to a government’s economic readiness to make public funding provision
for young children. In her research into school readiness, Walker asks the question, “What’s the hurry?” Walker, (2005) claims that Australia has one of the world’s youngest ages of school entry. No research to date indicates that Australian children are smarter or more successful because they have started school at a younger age (Walker, 2005). In contrast, Rudd (at that time the Leader of Australia’s Opposition Party) regarded investment in early childhood education as a means of empowering the economy of Australia for the future (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2007). Recognising that a problem in terms of current investment in early childhood existed, Rudd hinted at a proposed education revolution, in which his Labor Government (if elected) would lift the standards and quality of the outcomes and outputs of Australia’s education system.

Nobel-prize winning US economist, James Heckman, believes it is short-sighted to consider only the economic benefits of child care as a way of allowing parents to work and pay tax. He argues that ‘money spent in developing children’s social and emotional development may be the best way to stimulate economic growth’ (Eccleston, 2007: p.46). Eccleston, (2007) refers to Australian politicians who don’t appreciate the importance of early childhood research and its implications for society. Without changes to the existing fragmented system, Eccleston suggests there will need to be a significant increase in prison systems and welfare payments for all whose maladjusted social and emotional behaviours impact negatively on society (Eccleston, 2007: p.37).

It can be argued that educators and politicians will continue to view education and the economy from opposing and varied perspectives. Regrettably, whilst opinions and decisions about the economy and problematic nature of early childhood education and teaching are debated across the states and territories, teachers face continuing tension and uncertainty in the reshaping of their classroom pedagogies.

The establishment in 2004 of the National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership (now called Teaching Australia) created a greater awareness of the need for quality support and professional learning opportunities for early childhood educators (Elliott, 2006). A key element of the Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development,
report stated there must be “appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision”. The REAL professional learning program was established in 2004, as a specific form of appropriate training for teachers in NT Preschools and Transition classes participating in the Age of Entry Trial. Organisers of this professional learning development program sought to convey to participants concepts of the establishment of a clear policy about when children in the NT access publicly-funded Preschool and Transition programs. The organisers also emphasised that a single intake into Transition class (for all children turning five on or by June 30) policy would be established, indicating that the program was supported by significant research information. It was presumed by the participants that this research related to demonstrated improvement in life-learning outcomes consistency for all NT children, through equity in access to two years of pre-compulsory early learning programs for (Curriculum Services Division, 2005). No research information was specifically presented by the organisers of REAL to support the fact that equity access to two years of pre-compulsory early learning programs for all NT children would improve life-long outcomes for these children. It is assumed rather than proven that “significant research” alludes to the OECD 2001 document on which the Early Years Framework was originally based. However, the experience of Finland, consistently the highest performing country in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted every three years by the OECD, does not support this policy direction (Tuovinen, 2008).

Early Childhood Australia chief executive, Pam Cahir, recognises Australia’s lack of investment in the human resources needed to ensure the provision of maximum learning opportunities for children in early childhood education and care programs (Early Childhood Australia, 2007). Variance in teacher qualifications, salaries and policy coordination contributes to Australia’s lack of a systematic and integrated early childhood education and care approach. REAL is a major attempt to better equip NT early childhood educators in the delivery of quality programs, thereby making a difference to young children’s capacity to socialise and cooperate with other children and to develop self-esteem and confidence, in preparation for future learning.

The landscape of early childhood education and care, from global (OECD), to national (Australian Federal Government) and local (DEET, NT) perspectives
presents a challenging continuum of professional consensus and learning for early childhood educators and carers. Given the appearance of “our culture [evolving] faster than our biology” (Palmer, 2006: p.3) and the developed education world believing itself unable to keep up with this evolution, it is imperative that early childhood teachers seize every opportunity to avail themselves of current research literature and effective professional learning opportunities, to enable them to confront the pedagogical challenges of today’s early childhood programs.

2.6 INTERNATIONAL LANDSCAPES
The research of several authors (Beare, 2001; Newby, 2005; McCain and Jukes, 2001; Palmer, 2006; Elliott, 2006) continues to indicate that in global, national and local early childhood education, many problems with issues of the future of schooling are appearing for which there are no immediate solutions. There appears to be an ever-widening gap between educators and the children in their care. Palmer (2006), in her extensive research into the toxic effects on today’s young children, claims that the developed world is suffering epidemics of misery and behavioural problems amongst its young children. The World Health Organisation expects that by 2020, neuro-psychiatric disorders in children will increase in greater proportions than other health issues, for which there appears to be no immediate answer. The amazing pace of global culture has created an equal amount of exciting discoveries and problematic challenges for educators (Palmer, 2006).

The UK is considered by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001) to be an economically successful country. According to Professor Chris Husbands (Dean of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK) the rapidly changing school context, the need to resolve problematic school environments and programs resulting from the explosion of the online accessibility of information, the rapid development of non-formal providers of education and the increasing complexity of children’s social and economic lives, all pose huge challenges for schools (Husbands, 2005).

Following the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001) work in considering the strategic future for schools across the world, Husbands anticipated a changing context for school management in a changing world,
suggesting that an increasingly globalised economy and insecure workplace with a diversified workforce and a population increasingly demanding of personalised on-demand services will present huge challenges for all service professionals (Husbands, 2005).

In the professional development training program for UK, *Education Walsall 2005 Leadership and the Future child: What sort of schooling 2020?* Husbands (2005) directed head-teachers to consider concerns and possibilities in the future of schools and schooling, including perceptions that schools will be asked to assume more responsibility for pupils’ emotional and affective development, that formal assessment will have declined in importance for schools and pupils, that over twenty-five percent of pupils’ learning will be by electronic means, that industry and employers will exercise direct control over elements of schooling, that schools will be open for more than ten hours per day and that teachers’ career progression will partly depend on their professional development portfolio. Head teachers involved in Education 2020 (Husbands, 2005) recognised the challenging context of change and the urgency of working with a vision of the future in schooling through local and national collaboration and networking. Children’s trusts, organisations bringing together social services, health, education and other services, were established in *Every Child Matters*, the Children Act 2004, as part of the UK Government’s policy for improving children’s services (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). Comprehensive evaluation of the children’s trusts by Husbands’ team at the University of East Anglia, UK, in association with the National Children’s Bureau, reflects positive responses to the UK’s national vision for integrated children’s services and improved outcomes for children (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). The UK is considered by the OECD review team (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006) to be making significant progress in policy coordination, staff recruitment and training, work-family support and quality assurance in its early years programs.

**2.7 NATIONAL LANDSCAPES**

As early as 1986, Australia’s Federal Minister for Education, Senator Susan Ryan, claimed that education and the world of work were at the heart of the government’s economic strategy and national objectives.
Getting the education system right is essential for our plans ... the most efficient and the most equitable instrument which a national government has to push along change, reform and growth (Beare and Slaughter, 1993: p.37).

In 2007, Victoria’s acting Education Minister, Jacinta Allen, acknowledged that a proposal for a national schools curriculum was supported by all Australian states and territories. Although the structure of the new curriculum was not yet finalised, assurance was given by Ms Allen that it would not involve a “one size fits all” approach, “although it would obviously cover core subjects” (Northern Territory News, 2007, April).

National objectives and getting the education system right have become a greater concern at the heart of subsequent government economic strategies since Australia’s involvement in the 1998 OECD review. One controversial issue arising from the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001) comparative report was the existence of a dualism within Australia’s early childhood provision, namely that of a structural separation between care and education. It is generally accepted that care programs are under the management of health and community organisations, whilst education is managed by the department of education. Fleer (2000) believes the dualism to have been created by Australia’s administrative structures and that it has “permeated the whole early childhood profession”. She also believes that it has “created a chasm between sectors, entrenching opposing views of high and low status within early childhood discourse in Australia” (Fleer, 2000: p.14).

At the same time, a national concern existed about the availability of quality early childhood education for all Australian children and the range of qualifications and experience of the staff in these programs. Elliott (2006) reflects on the lack of uniformity of qualifications in early childhood centres across Australian states and territories sectors and jurisdictions:

Each State and Territory has its own early childhood staffing requirements, guidelines and/or regulations. There is no nationally shared understanding of appropriate credentials for staff … or about the content or focus on courses preparing early childhood practitioners (Elliott, 2006: p.34).

It is therefore of great interest and significance that Australia is now moving to determine the framework of a new national curriculum. In October, 2006, the Council
for the Australian Federation established a steering committee to review the *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty First Century*, which the Australian states, territories and the Commonwealth jointly signed in 1999. The steering committee’s report, *The Future of Schooling in Australia* (Dawkins, 2007) acknowledges early childhood education as a key element of a child’s learning cycle and recognises that national gains in early childhood education provide significant benefits to Australia’s society. Such a commitment from the Council for the Australian Federation offers brighter prospects for Elliott’s observations and concerns to be seriously addressed.

In 2004 the AEU, in consultation with all key government, education and community representatives commissioned an independent inquiry into the state of preschool education in Australia, placing significant emphasis on the providers of preschool education and its availability for all children. In 2006 a report commissioned by the NSW Teachers’ Federation called for Australia “to follow the example of other enlightened countries, in making early childhood education and care a national priority” (Rossmanith, 2006: p.20).

Tony Vinson, Honorary Professor in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney, believes that problems continue because of an absence of national leadership in relation to high-quality and integrated early childhood and care services (Rossmanith, 2006). He also believes that education and care services should be universally available for all three and four year olds and that such service should be offered at an even earlier age to more vulnerable or disadvantaged children. Vinson claims that most of the twelve countries involved in an OECD survey are now committed to “providing at least two years of free education before the start of compulsory schooling” (Rossmanith, 2006: p.20). Vinson’s beliefs are reflected in the report, *Strong Beginnings* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2005) with its accompanying professional development training program for NT teachers, *REAL*.

Throughout Australia today there still appears to be confusion about when a young child should move to school. There is a general view that learning completed during preschool years is accepted as play, but real learning must be set out and take place in
a particular way in the more formal setting of a school (Walker, 2005). However, several states and territories can be seen to be addressing the complex issues related to early childhood education and care, with encouraging progress and results. Australia’s much-debated early childhood education and care programs agenda is now being addressed and given priority by the newly elected Rudd Labor Government.

The Queensland Government, in its Supporting Queensland children and families: Towards an Early Years Strategy discussion paper (Beattie and Pitt, 2006) recognises that families are the social fabric of the community and that a child’s early experiences shape his or her future. Priority is therefore given to supporting parents and their children in the areas of health, education and child care. The Queensland Government believes that “experiences early in life shape a child’s immediate and future wellbeing” and that it is therefore “better to invest in the early years and promote healthy child development rather than to fund costly solutions to more complex problems in later life” (Beattie and Pitt 2006: p.3).

The discussion paper, Supporting Queensland children and families: Towards an Early Years Strategy (Beattie and Pitt, 2006) was released to seek the views of parents, service providers, professionals, researchers and the community about preferred early childhood education and care services. The Queensland Government is currently considering ways to bring all services together, responding to modern child and family needs and enabling all families to access these services.

An initiative of the Queensland Education Department was the introduction of a new preparatory year (first year of school) in January, 2007, which appears to be in line with the Australian Federal Government’s 2003 national directive for uniformity of the single intake into school policy.

The future needs of students and the acknowledgement that society is faced with rapid social, economic, technological and cultural change have influenced the Queensland College of Teachers to introduce a Professional Standards for Queensland Teachers document (Queensland College of Teachers, 2007). This document recognises the changing nature of teachers’ work and the new demands being placed on teachers by students, their families and society. Globalisation, the explosion of information communication technology, diverse family structures and changing workforce
patterns are jointly acknowledged by the Queensland Government and Department of Education, Science and Training (Queensland College of Teachers, 2007) as impacting factors on children’s abilities to participate effectively as life-long learners of the future.

In Victoria, preschool education is not part of that State’s Department of Education. This creates fragmentation and inconsistency in the transition from childcare to preschool and from preschool to school. Vinson, in his national research and reporting on high-quality and integrated early childhood and care services stressed the importance of linking the curriculum of preschool education into the early years of school (Rossmanith, 2006). In her report on national leadership and the advantages for all young children to have access to early education and care facilities in Victoria, Rossmanith (2006) emphasised the fact that many difficulties arise when preschool and primary school teachers are separated by physical distance and distance in collegial relationships and programming. In Victoria, children who are four years of age attend a one year Kindergarten program, which can be in a range of settings, from purpose-built kindergartens, community based and private child care centres, community halls or schools. Child care is provided for children up to age six, usually by a mix of qualified and other staff. These care services are overseen by the Department of Human Services. Implied in this fragmentation of services is a variability of staff qualifications and competence within and between centres (Department of Human Services, 2007).

In the Northern Territory preschools are located within the school system with degree-qualified staff. The Age of Entry Trial, the development of the Early Years Framework and the provision of the REAL professional development training program were all established to address early childhood education and care issues and to assist early years teachers resituate their classroom practices in the paradigm of the new learning involved in the Age of Entry Trial.

The provision of quality early childhood education and care in Australia remains firmly on this country’s agenda (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006), gaining even greater attention after Australia’s change in government in November, 2007. Countries regularly participating in the OECD
committee reviews, including Australia and the UK, remain committed to turning
governmental and local attention to early childhood education and care issues.

2.8 THE HOPE OF THE FUTURE

2.8.1 Learning Programs
In order to enhance the integration of early childhood services, that is, care and education, *Starting Strong II* (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006) identified key policy areas for consideration by governments of review-participating countries. Two significant policies include: “to create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance” and “to develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all ECEC services” (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006: p.4). Many OECD countries now use a formal curriculum to guide early childhood education and care services. Currently each Australian State and Territory’s service provider has the responsibility for developing and facilitating its State or Territory curriculum documents. Until a new national curriculum is established and mandated, State and Territory curricula continue to be based on local consultation and interpretation. These frameworks vary greatly in what they cover and emphasise.

The learning areas that receive most focus in official curricula are emergent literacy and numeracy. Currently it is at this point that states and territories begin to diverge in their understandings of curriculum. A curriculum based on a sequential learning approach favours the selection and advancement of knowledge and skills in different developmental areas, whilst a holistic active learning approach addresses all developmental areas concurrently through play and broad project work. It was not the intention of the OECD Review (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1998) to direct participating countries in the prescription of their curriculum format, but rather to strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning. Discussions continue at government level on the format of Australia’s national curriculum. The Council for the Australian Federation believes that the collaborative approach suggested in the April, 2007 report, *The Future of Schooling in Australia* will promote high quality schooling across Australia (Dawkins, 2007). Included in this report’s proposed areas of work is that of “working towards a National
Curriculum”. This development of a national curriculum will “set core content, establish standards for national testing” and “ensure that student achievement is reported” uniformly across each state and territory (Dawkins, 2007: p.31).

In 2007 Rudd (at that time the Leader of Australia’s Opposition Party) stressed a need for the rapid advancement of knowledge and skills in all school children, in order to raise the quality and skills of Australia’s workforce for the future economy (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2007). As revealed by Rudd, Australia’s declining productivity growth and the ongoing economic debate prompted his [then] Opposition Party’s view, that of urgency in “delivering school education systems” (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2007).

According to Rudd, a concentration of more practical programs within Australian schools will raise Australia’s productivity and underpin its long term prosperity. It is highly likely that Rudd will come into disagreement with early childhood educators if his proposed practical programs remove opportunities for young children to solve problems and take risks in their learning, in unhurried fashion. Early childhood educators have a reputation for preferring play-based programs, believing that children learn best when given opportunities to develop their curiosity and confidence. However, to draw a solid conclusion between brain stimulation and good early childhood education may not be so simple. In Walker’s research into brain development, she concludes that the most meaningful stimulation for young children’s brains is in the provision of lots of time to play and the opportunity for young children to be creative and to use their imagination (Walker, 2005).

Arguments, preferences and decisions about whether learning programs should emphasise the acquisition and application of knowledge through play, or have a more formal, academic knowledge acquisition base have been the focus of many education committee meeting discussions. It would appear that, as education and society move further into the twenty-first century, they are faced with a paradox.

Along with the current state of education, we have what has become known as the push down curriculum. What was formerly expected of children in grade 1 has now been pushed down into their first year of school. This push down curriculum places many children under increased pressure (Walker, 2005: p.43)
Many early childhood educators (Bredekamp, 1997; Jones and Reynolds, 1992; Leach, 1994) believe that children should develop a desire and curiosity for learning and confidence in their own learning, rather than achieving a pre-specified level of knowledge and proficiency. These authors believe that when early childhood settings are places for play, exploration and love of learning, a strong foundation for lifelong learning is established. A general summary by the OECD of the English-speaking education world is its adoption of a “readiness for school approach which broadly focuses on the cognitive development in the early years, together with a range of knowledge, skills and dispositions” (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006: p.57). It warns against the use of programs and approaches that do not recognise the unique psychology and natural learning styles of young children.

Elliott (2006) and Rossmanith (2006) regret the organisational variability and lack of uniformity throughout Australia of early childhood and care programs. According to Elliott (2006: pp.7-8), programs differ “from community to community, state to state, with location, philosophy and educational approaches influenced as much by history, demographics and demand as by contemporary evidence on early childhood development and learning”. Exploration of the current developments in early childhood education and care programs is rendered complex for the above reasons.

Recent election promise commitments to early childhood education made by Kevin Rudd’s Labor Government, in November, 2007, offer some hope of achieving greater focus and integration in organisation and programming for the early years’ education and care sector. Elliott (2008) believes the door to change in early childhood education and care is now open because “early childhood education is on the political and community radar as never before” (Elliott, 2008).

2.8.2 Professional Development Programs
Greater government commitment to early childhood education and care is of paramount significance to early childhood educators who are now forced along a crash course in twenty-first century lifestyles. Along the way they are learning a great deal about the kind of world which children are now moving into and are recognising the need for schooling and education to make appropriate changes. Beare and
Slaughter (1993: p.77) believe that ‘the future of the world and that of its children depend quite literally on how well we can accommodate new ways of seeing in schools’. Angelica, child of the future envisioned by Beare (2001: p.17), is emphatic in her desires for her lifelong learning program:

I want to be hopeful and happy and comfortable about my future … Education is all about hope, isn’t it? Your schooling was. Most of all I want to be wise over what to believe about me and my world. I want to know what the wisest people on earth believe. I want to know how to be a success with my life …My school-teachers are very important to me because they tell me how to deal with the future – the long, long future.

Education is an attitude for life, with the learning process being the means of gaining understanding, knowledge and skills, claims Walker (2005). Today, children’s learning processes are indeed spiralling and rocketing at unprecedented speed. Beare and Slaughter (1993: p38), recognising this, offered a warning that “social life, the world of work, the international community and education itself are all in the process of being transformed by the macro shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society”.

Beare and Slaughter, (1993) predicted that there would be a huge, fundamental and intentional change in education, claiming that, as twenty-first century schools recognise a need to adapt to change, they will begin to operate in ways that are quite different from what has been accepted over recent decades. Leach (1994: p.26) suggests that “children are a large part of the present and the whole of everybody’s future” and therefore the primary focus of every community must be its children, schools, schooling and learning. Beare and Slaughter (1993) believe it is essential for twenty-first century educational philosophy to balance social, economic, individual and cultural requirements.

Early childhood education cannot escape the current paradigm of rapid change. Elliott (2006) claims the need for all children to have access to good quality early childhood programs with appropriate curricula and pedagogy, in order to provide children with social and cognitive experiences that promote independence and positive attitudes to learning. Early childhood educators, because of their close relations with families and their abilities to engage with children must confront and manage change. Generally, early childhood educators are the first to encounter a
multiplicity of family backgrounds and experiences in the educational setting and come face to face with increasingly complex social environments. These factors create imperatives for new pedagogies, curricula and organisational practices to accommodate this pluralism. It is therefore essential that the early childhood sector “develop and adopt standards that increase effective practice in early childhood contexts” with appropriate, high quality professional development to enhance and maintain teachers’ professional competence (Elliott, 2006: p.42).

Research projects in Australia, USA and the UK, resulting from work undertaken with the OECD, focus on the urgency of preparing teachers for the task of educating a national population in which boundaries are compromised by a globalised, networked world (Newby, 2005). Elliott (2006) suggests that early childhood educators across Australia are in a unique position to be agents of change, to assist in the formulation of standards and guidelines and to develop strong professional frameworks and structures. Fullan (1993: p.12) defines change agency as [educators] being self-conscious about the nature of change and the change process. He suggests that, when teachers become agents of change, they will make a difference in children’s lives whilst substantially deepening their knowledge of pedagogy.

A key factor in assisting teachers to answer the question of Does it happen all at once? is teacher willingness to participate in learning-enriched professional development programs. Reinforcing the concept of teachers addressing the availability of and participation in ongoing professional learning is the suggestion that “professional development is the process of growth in competency and maturity through which teachers add range, depth and quality to performance of their professional tasks” (O’Brien, 2007: p.4). This recognises that professional development occurs chiefly on the job through the work and career opportunities given to teachers and is defined as a career long issue. O’Brien (2007) gives several definitions of the term professional development, including the suggestion that it promotes teacher growth and renewal and brings about more effective teaching and improved student learning. Ongoing targeted and appropriate professional development is a cornerstone of quality in early childhood settings, as emphasised by Elliott (2006). With so many Australian children participating in early childhood
education programs, Elliott encourages teachers involved in those settings to actively and regularly seek to advance their knowledge, skills and understandings.

Fullan (1993) also anticipates that, as teachers participate in professional development programs, they will develop habits and skills of continuous inquiry and learning. However, it cannot be assumed that all early childhood educators are convinced of their need for ongoing professional development, nor in the guaranteed success of the implementation of knowledge, ideas or activities gained during professional development programs. Early childhood staff in Australia, claims Ebbeck (1991) have been required to respond to a huge number of changes in their complex roles. Ebbeck (1991) suggests that professional development is about a teacher’s commitment to continuous personal and professional growth, but for many early childhood educators concepts of professional development programs, seminars and modules conjure up many different images.

Regarding good professional learning to be at the heart of sound teaching practice, Halford (2007: p.22) readily acknowledges that not all professional learning programs offer ‘good’ learning, claiming them to be “a hit and miss affair”. Halford (2007) suggests that the current lucrative sub-industry growth within education of professional development and learning programs does not guarantee that staff professional learning or school improvement actually take place.

Bartlett (2007) emphasises the gap that can occur between acquired professional development ideas at professional learning programs and their translation and application in the workplace.

   Something happens between the professional workshop and the classroom…For a range of reasons our old habits tend to displace our new learning and our ambitious goals. The great ideas we just acquired often don’t translate into changed practice (Bartlett, 2007: pp.47-8)

It is generally accepted that the presentation of professional development includes an expectation and structure within an organisation to transfer new ideas, ongoing, long-term systematic change for the participating individual and organisation and full organisational support with scheduled follow-up incentive to change (Bartlett, 2007). Bartlett adds the factors of motivation, abilities, money, time and the differing
expectations of each participant and professional development provider as all influencing the professional development program’s effectiveness.

The REAL professional development modules were designed to “connect all early years educators and carers in NT contexts with shared philosophies, principles and practices of evidence-based, quality programs and approaches” (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p.7). These modules were intended to provide opportunities for teachers to reflect upon and reshape their pedagogies. Ample encouragement was given for teachers to collaborate, interact and contribute to the change process and to research and reflect on their practice. Implicit in the provision of an effective professional development training program by Curriculum Services Division officers of DEET (NT) was an anticipated impact upon the teachers’ knowledge base, the setting in motion of a process of change in the teachers’ professionalism and the lifelong learning process of the young children in their care.

Whilst there does not appear to be a consensus on the age of entry for the proposed single intake into Australian schools, nor whether this intake implies entry to formal education, a government funded institution or an early childhood education or care program with graduate staff, it was intended by its organisers that the REAL professional development training program would assist teachers in becoming pedagogy change agents in the NT. Implied in the Federal Government’s commitment to national professional standards and guidelines, it is imperative that each State and Territory addresses professional qualifications for all early childhood educators. DEET (NT) accepted this challenge through the Age of Entry Trial, for which the REAL professional development training program was created.

The Australian Government’s policy is expected to be mandated by 2010. In rolling out our trial now, we are preparing our schools and early childhood teachers well in advance of this timeline (Curriculum Services Division, 2005).

Findings from a study, Effective Professional Development and Change in Practice: Barriers Science Teachers Encounter and Implications for Reform (Johnson, 2006) indicate that, even with effective professional development training, science teachers continued to encounter technical, political and cultural barriers in their work. This study showed that even the best intended professional development efforts did not
reveal or address the beliefs or needs of the teachers involved. This could easily be the case in the early childhood sector.

2.9 CONCLUSION
This chapter has discussed pedagogy and school perspectives for the contemporary teacher in the light of the culture of current educational change and future-world scenarios. Global, national and local realities and considerations for teachers, as they address the future needs of children whose social, economic, technological and cultural lives are rapidly changing have also been discussed. It is assumed in this chapter that quality experiences and outcomes for children in early childhood education and care programs are dependent on the competence of the teachers in those programs. Of great significance therefore is the new initiative, the Age of Entry Trial, introduced by DEET (NT), with an accompanying appropriate and effective professional development training program, REAL. DEET (NT) directors and training program facilitators recognise this professional development training program as a means of supporting and promoting the highest quality practice opportunities for teachers in the NT, thereby enabling early childhood teachers to deal with contemporary classroom realities and make sizeable shifts in their practice.

Chapter Three will discuss the methods used to formulate and tackle the study of NT early childhood teachers’ perspectives on how they managed, or were unable to manage their teaching practice, in the context of their exposure to a professional development training program REAL which was designed by DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers to support and promote teachers’ best practice opportunities.
Chapter 3: Conceptualisation of the Research Methodology

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This study is designed to formulate a set of theoretical propositions regarding the perspectives of early childhood (lower primary) school teachers on how they have managed changes to their teaching practice in the context of their exposure to one specific professional development training program. It is positioned in terms of early childhood school teachers’ perspectives, encompassing what these teachers think, believe, predict, conceptualise and evaluate with regard to the value of a specified form of professional development training and the resulting actions, orientations, dispositions and attitudes they adopt. The justification for conducting this study is three-fold.

Firstly, it aims to contribute empirically derived theoretical propositions concerning teacher perspectives on relevant professional development training programs. Secondly, this study examines the implications of teacher perspectives for pedagogical practice based on evidence-based research (Johnson, 2006; Department for Education and Skills, 2007; O’Brien, 2007) that teachers’ perspectives play an integral role in the degree to which they implement changes in their practice when appropriate professional development training has been provided. Thirdly, this study makes recommendations based on grounded theoretical propositions, for further design, implementation and evaluation of teacher education through appropriate professional development training programs, in the context of early childhood educators.

All educational research, the nature of knowledge construction that is the result of research, its theory and method of acquisition and justification must be embedded in and connected to a theoretical framework. The justification for conducting this study begins with a systematic reflection on the need and procedure for the investigation into the perspectives of teachers and the epistemological theory and ontological position upon which it is based. The justification will elaborate on the selected interpretivist paradigm of research, which determines how the problem of this study, namely that of investigating the perspectives of teachers on how they have or have not managed change to their teaching practice, is formulated and interrogated. This
chapter will also make more explicit the research methods, participant selection, data collection procedures and data analysis that led up to the formulation of the theoretical propositions related to the initial research problem. Further issues to do with the trustworthiness of the findings and the ethics of doing such research will be outlined.

This is an *interpretive qualitative research*, embedded within a methodological framework, based on the key principles of *symbolic interactionism*. The theoretical underpinnings of the methodology, the ontological and epistemological positions are described and the paradigms underpinning the theoretical perspective of *symbolic interactionism* are developed.

### 3.2 INTERPRETIVE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

#### 3.2.1 Ontological Position

The first step in any research process, suggests O’Donoghue (2006) is an observation, a question a person has about the social world one lives and works in and a curiosity to find solutions or bring about change. Mason (1996: p.11) frames the question, “What is the nature of the phenomena I wish to investigate?” and elaborates that extensive thinking has already taken place well before a research question is defined. Over recent years, personal reflection on past experiences in different local and global teaching environments and programs (Australia and the UK) has accelerated various concerns related to current early childhood pedagogy. These concerns centre on the acceleration of complexities in the early childhood classroom and an apparent inability amongst teachers to make appropriate changes to accommodate or cope with these changes. Such reflections and perceptions need to be explored, analysed and re-directed to assist in future purposeful and productive teaching.

Emery (1986) claims research to be an ancient and ubiquitous activity, emanating from a curiosity about others and their worlds. He argues that conversation, asking questions, working together and teasing out intentions and reasons for behaviour are all fundamental functions of research. Audi (1998) suggests that it is possible to learn a great deal from one’s perspectives and that reflective thinking on the nature of social reality establishes an individual’s ontological position or perspective. Mason (1996) claims that social reality is noticeably prevalent in the teaching profession and is
underpinned by many complex concepts, including understandings of people, emotions, interpretations, attitudes, beliefs, social constructions, communications, actions, reactions, behaviours, rules, organisations and more. The fundamental function of this research is therefore to satisfy curiosity about a perceived change in the social reality of the teaching profession.

*Ontology*, states Crotty (1998: p.10) “is a study of being”. It is about reality and the nature of existence. Ontological issues prompt us to consider the structure of observed reality, to ask questions and to make links between what is observed and the concepts and constructs that underpin it.

The *ontology* employed in this study is based on the recognition of a changing reality within the teaching profession. Today’s teaching experiences are becoming increasingly problematic, with complexities in the contemporary classroom rapidly escalating. These changes represent a new reality, for which 1960s teacher training programs have left many teachers ill-equipped. Senge et al. (2000: p.31) refer to the “industrial model of schools” which controlled how students learned and how teachers taught. It is Senge’s belief that, “like other industrial age institutions today, educational institutions are caught in extraordinary cross-currents of change” (Senge et al. 2000: p.32).

Today’s *real* world in education is vastly different to the *real* world of the 1960s. In recent years, staffroom, meeting and incidental collegial discussions in the NT indicate that there is an apparent deterioration in classroom behaviour and suggest that many teachers are experiencing increasing levels of frustration. Although not officially documented, these observations and concerns prompt questioning of the appropriateness of professional development training programs as effective tools for providing opportunities for teachers to gain the necessary knowledge, understandings and capacities to address ever-increasing classroom complexities.

The *ontological* position underpinning this study addresses teacher beliefs about those changing realities, which are perceived to be true, which are inferred and how teachers justify those beliefs. Teacher assumptions that a complement of qualification upgrades (from three year trained diploma level to four year trained degree level), as
required across Australia from 1980 and optional participation in professional development programs would guarantee years of continued successful teaching practice now appear very naive. Some teachers do not even consider professional development to be a priority for successful teaching practice. Beare (2001) uses the voice of futures child, Angelica, to portray the future for teachers who have been aware of some schooling changes in recent years but are now becoming increasingly aware of and concerned about more radical changes that must be addressed.

In future days I will admire you for being able to look forward with me and to help me define what I need to learn (Beare, 2001: p.17)

Freire (1972) speaking of the world as a reality in process and the need for the transformational character of reality claims that human beings need to be re-creators, not merely spectators, in their world. The re-creator, in this case the researcher, claims Freire (1972) has an existing reality, comprised of personal experiences, beliefs, knowledge and perceptions.

This research is designed around an ontology that values a deeper understanding of the reality of the complexities within the current pedagogical system and the assumption that change should and can take place, in order to provide a reconstructive orientation to teachers’ work.

### 3.2.2 Epistemological Position

The research reported here is based on a constructed reality, a view of educational and social research in which the researcher constructs meanings within the social environment (Borg, Gall and Gall, 2001). It focuses on teachers ascribing meaning to their social environment, as they build understandings within their work environment, through experience and professional development training and thereby individually constructing new and differing social realities.

To construct meaning in research it is necessary to connect the perceived reality (ontology) to a way of understanding it, making sense of it and giving purpose to pursuing embedded knowledge. Crotty (1998: p.10) elaborates on this need to connect the reality, “what is”, to the nature of knowledge, or “what it means to know”.
He calls this sense of knowledge basis *epistemology*, defining it as a way of looking at the world and making sense of it, in order to establish a knowledge base for guiding future action. Blake, Smeyers, Smith and Standish (2001) believe that the pursuit of knowledge is good for the mind and suggest that epistemology embodies profound reasons for humans to take action.

This study’s *epistemological* position is embedded in *constructionism*, which claims that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Crotty (1998) claims that *constructionism* views all knowledge and meaningful reality to be contingent upon human practices and that these are constructed through interaction between human beings and their social world.

The epistemological position of *constructionism* is therefore a most suitable view through which to construct meaning of a perceived complexity, that of the perceived need for teachers to be agents of change, within the current pedagogical system.

Blake, Smeyers, Smith and Standish (2001) suggest that with the advent of the Internet and digital Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the traditional construction of knowledge is rapidly changing. *Epistemology* today is perhaps better described as addressing the potential of knowledge, rather than attempting to define or investigate accepted knowledge bases. Given the unprecedented rapid change over three decades of teaching and the need to make meaning of the complex lives of today’s young children, this research establishes and directs the building of self-knowledge and justification, addressing the potential of knowledge as suggested by Blake et al. (2001) while equally recognising and embracing the dimensions of the established forms of research to construct meaning.

### 3.2.3 Research Paradigms

Underlying this research is the assumption that things may not be right as they are and need to be changed. These assumptions, for the researcher, require a process of negotiation of meaning, in order to modify people’s understandings and views (Blackledge and Hunt, 1985). As these assumptions are clarified and narrowed in their focus, clearer ideas of the study question and process are formed.
According to Wolcott (1992: p.7) there are three categories into which most ideas can be classified, namely reform-driven ideas, concept-driven ideas and big theory-driven ideas. The category of ideas that best guide this inquiry has its origin in the big theory-driven area, in which a unified theory to explain the observed uniformities of social behaviour, social organisation and social change is developed.

Kuhn (1970) refers to these big theories as paradigms, or theories that comprise a set of beliefs about a specific science or scientific knowledge. Lambert (2003) suggests that paradigms encompass a common set of assumptions that can be described as a particular philosophical view or tradition. On the other hand, Husen (1988) and O’Donoghue (2006: p.11) elaborate on a paradigm as determining “how a problem is formulated and methodically tackled”.

The terms paradigm and framework are frequently interchanged. Paradigm-guided research requires a strategy, a plan of action and a process or design to link assumptions, beliefs or questions. This study focuses on social behaviour, organisation and change to develop a unified theory regarding teachers and their management of change. It is therefore considered to be a big theory guided or paradigm guided research.

Four major paradigms, frameworks or big theories exist within the social science field: Positivism, Interpretivism, Critical Theory and Postmodernism (Wolcott (1992). The paradigm best suited to inform this research is Interpretivism. O’Donoghue (2006) claims that interpretivists examine the meanings that specific experiences or events have for people in their everyday settings. In this study these everyday settings refer to the classroom setting and teaching practice of early years’ teachers.

The interpretivist approach brings together the individual and society and provides a way for human action to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices. In considering the everyday setting of current teaching practice and an assumed need for teachers to make changes in their practice and accommodate an increasing number of complexities upon the developing child’s future school
programs, it is anticipated that the education of young children will be improved and enhanced.

3.2.4 Qualitative Research

The *interpretivist* approach, through its emphasis on interpretation of human behaviour, is directly associated with *qualitative research* methods. According to Gibbons and Sanderson (2002) *qualitative research* focuses on the study of human behaviour. *Qualitative research* methods consider individual perspectives, making personal constructs and negotiating meanings and definitions of participants’ situations central to the research. Mason (1996) suggests that *qualitative research* includes the continuous re-creation of social life through human actions, the personal involvement of the researcher and the interpretation of specific data through an understanding of the participant’s actions and meanings.

This study seeks to discover the perspectives of early childhood teachers on their teaching practice, in ways commensurate with recent professional development course outcomes of creating effective learning environments of the future. It is concerned with discovering how teachers manage or deal with a specified professional development training program to change their pedagogy. Negotiated meanings and constructs will be elicited through the analysis and interpretation of data collected in researcher-teacher interview conversations. It is anticipated that the extent to which teachers have responded to professional development training and self-assessment of their ability to make desirable or essential changes in pedagogy will become evident.

Every teacher has a unique cultural and experiential context, which influences how new ideas, procedures and standards are understood and implemented. Effective interviewing reveals greater understandings of each participant’s perspectives and actions. *Interpretive* studies attempt to understand phenomena through meanings that people assign to them, acknowledging the subjective nature of the researcher’s data analysis. In this instance the researcher shares common ground with the participants. The main assumption therefore in adopting the *interpretive, qualitative research* methodology is that many realities exist for each participant, not just one (Travis, 1999). It is through the collective descriptive and inferential analysis of all participant
data that the many realities will be interpreted and formed into a *grounded substantive* theory about teachers’ perspectives on dealing with change.

### 3.3 SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Identified within the field of social sciences is one orientation, *symbolic interactionism*, which specifically focuses on developing theoretical perspectives centred around the nature of social and individual interaction, on the present rather than the past and on issues that are very real and alive. Hargreaves (1993: p.149) claims the *symbolic interactionism* approach to be especially valuable to teacher-researchers, as it is his belief that “teachers have no explicit conceptual apparatus in which to express and communicate these skills – and they reject the traditional language of the educational sciences to that end”.

In many instances the traditional language of the educational sciences appears to be theoretical and impractical to the classroom teacher. A teacher’s rejection of such traditional language comes from a need for a more appropriate approach, one that is able to examine their particular reference group and provide a specific language through which they can express and communicate their findings. O’Donoghue (2006) refers to *symbolic interactionism* having an empathic perspective, one that offers sympathy and understanding towards the research participants. Hargreaves (1993) therefore believes *symbolic interactionism* to be the most suitable approach for the provision of such a language for teacher-researchers. Blumer (1969) claims *symbolic interactionism* to be a down-to-earth approach to the study of human group life and human conduct. Any study of the group life of teachers, their perspectives and behaviours is ideally situated within the *symbolic interactionism* approach.

According to Mason (1996) *symbolic interactionism* is grounded in a philosophical position that is *interpretivist* and is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced. It is based on methods of data generation which are flexible and sensitive to social context and also based on methods of analysis and explanation building, which involve understandings of complexity, detail and context. Teachers perceive and interpret their world through socially developed perspectives (O’Donoghue, 2006). Analysis of the interview data
enables the researcher to make sense of how teachers see and interpret what they see in the social world of their classrooms.

The aim of research methodology is primarily to facilitate researchers’ engagement in the process of scientific enquiry. All human beings view their world through socially developed perspectives which observers use to make sense out of situations and to act as filters through which everything is perceived and interpreted. Charon (2001: p.27) describes perspectives as “interrelated sets of words … used to order physical reality and enable researchers to make assumptions and value judgements about what is both seen and not seen”.

This study reflects such an approach, designed to analyse, interpret and explain early childhood teachers’ perspectives on their teaching practice, after their engagement in a specific professional training program designed to assist them in managing change. As teachers perceive and interpret their world through socially developed perspectives, analysis of interview data will enable the researcher to make sense of how the early childhood teachers see and interpret what they see in the social world of their classrooms and within their professional learning environments.

Symbolic interactionism research aims to “see things from the perspective of the participants” in which the researcher aims to carry out unstructured interviews, to gather and analyse data (Crotty, 1998: pp.6-7). Research that aims primarily to consider the participants’ perspectives may limit or bias deeper reflection on the difference between a participant’s reality and the researcher’s concept of that reality. Crotty (1998: p.83)) suggests the phenomenological method (also an interpretivist approach to human inquiry) is a method “geared towards collecting and analysing data in ways that do not prejudice their subjective nature”. As this research aims to focus on understanding and analysing participant views, it seeks to guard against any researcher knowledge or presuppositions that may influence the data analysis and theory formulation.

3.3.1 Grounded Theory
The quality of relationships between the researcher and participants plays a critical role in the construction of an emergent theory. From the researcher’s philosophical
position, in this case, *realism* which Crotty (1998: p.10), describes as “an ontological notion asserting realities that exist outside the mind” interview data have been interpreted to construct participant views of their social classroom reality and professional learning lives. Mason (1996) suggests that *interpretive, qualitative research* is grounded in a philosophical position which helps to rationalise what is going on and which gives an account of what is and not what should, could or ought to be.

In a research project guided by a *grounded theory* approach the researcher is grounded in a philosophical position, based on the premise that the emergent theory comes primarily from the data collected, not from other sources. The *grounded theory* researcher observes what happens in practical, real-life situations and attempts to make sense from these observations. Strauss and Corbin (1994: p.100) argue that *grounded theories* call for each new situation to be explored through the openness of the researcher, in order to make “systematic statements of plausible relationships”.

A teacher’s reality is social and what the teachers see and perceive is developed socially through interaction with the children they teach, parents, colleagues and the community. Individuals can be informed or limited by their perspectives, often finding it difficult to see outside of their own perspectives. Hargreaves (1993: p.63) suggests that *symbolic interactionist* studies in which the language of teachers engaging in professional development is analysed can provide the participants with “an opportunity to judge and appraise the reflection [of themselves] they see and perhaps as a result, seek to change themselves and their professional world”.

Blumer (1969) expounds the notion that individuals experience and construct meaning of concrete and abstract experiences through social interaction with other members of the society to which they belong. For teachers it is especially significant, given the fact that teaching is entrenched in social interaction and communication, that they develop a sense of themselves and are provided with opportunities to allow them to see themselves in a way they believe others see them. Crotty (1998) explains that the basic tenets of *symbolic interactionism* are language, communication, interrelationships and community. Hargreaves (1993: p. 63) argues that teachers have no “explicit conceptual apparatus in which to express and communicate their
skills” and therefore *symbolic interactionism* is a suitable function to “provide such a language”. Humans and especially teachers, through their ongoing interactions within the school and greater community, act towards people and things according to the meaning they attach to them. Teachers negotiate their meaning through language and their thoughts are their mental expressions of different points of view.

### 3.4 CONCLUSION

In chapter three the rationale for adopting the *interpretivist* paradigm for this study was outlined. The considerations of this chapter justify the adoption of *symbolic interactionism* as the theoretical framework underpinning an *interpretive qualitative research* such as the study reported in this thesis. When teachers participate in a professional development training program they give meaning to their current pedagogy. Professional development enables teachers to respond to the program content. It provides them with the opportunity to use language to articulate their thoughts and perspectives with the assumed intent to act upon these thoughts in the immediate future.

In a research which studies the effects of teachers undertaking change in their programs, *symbolic interactionism provides the structure* for a reflective and socially derived interpretation of these teacher behaviours. In the next chapter the research methods, the central research problem of the study will be considered and the method of collection and interpretation of the interviewee data will be developed.
Chapter 4: Research Methods

4.1 INTRODUCTION
The rationale behind the choice of methodology is presented in this chapter. The central research problem and guiding questions are enumerated and the study population, interview procedures and data collection methods are explained. What follows is a systematic and detailed delineation of the process of data analysis and interpretation, using interpretive coding and an argument for the generation of the interrelated theoretical propositions from the data. Finally, issues of ethics in accordance to the interpretive, qualitative research methodology are addressed.

4.2 RESEARCH METHODS
The necessity of understanding teachers’ contextual realities in the hope of improving the quality of early childhood education and care requires appropriate methods of research. Research methods, Crotty (1998) suggests, are the concrete techniques or procedures one plans to use, in order to gather and analyse the data required to generate a theory. Mason (1996) claims that appropriate, available data sources and methods of data generation, the collection of relevant information and the organisation of categories for the collected data components are essential requirements for the generation of a theory. Since symbolic interactionism is grounded in the assumptions, perspectives and actions resulting from human beings socially interacting with each other, it presents the potential for providing conceptually rich data, in this instance through teacher-researcher interviews. This data will provide the basis for the formulation of theoretical propositions in a creative and open-ended way.

4.3 CENTRAL RESEARCH PROBLEMS, GUIDING AND DATA COLLECTION QUESTIONS
Positioning this study within the interpretivist inductive qualitative research methodology and analysis of the perspectives based on symbolic interactionism guided the formation of the study’s central research problem, guiding research and data collection questions. Incorporating the key elements of the central research problem, the main research question was framed thus:
What are the perspectives of early childhood teachers on their teaching practice, in ways commensurate with recent professional development course outcomes of creating effective learning environments of the future?

The following guiding questions pertaining to early childhood teachers’ perspectives regarding the usefulness of professional training programs to enhance pedagogy were initially enumerated:

1. What are the intentions of Northern Territory early years teachers with regard to engaging in changes in their teaching practice, as outlined in the REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers professional development program? What reasons do they give for these intentions?
2. What strategies do the teachers say they use to achieve these intentions? What reasons do they give for selecting these strategies?
3. What is the significance of these intentions and strategies for the early years’ teachers? What reasons do they give for the significance which they attribute to these intentions and strategies?
4. What are the outcomes NT early years teachers expect from implementing their chosen strategies, aimed at creating effective learning environments of the future? What reasons do they give for these expected outcomes?

In the context of this study and by way of explanation, early years are the NT schools equivalent of the nationally accepted term of lower primary or early childhood (ages 0 – 8 years).

A number of prompt questions, based on the above guiding questions, served as the basis for data collection during the qualitative interviewing process. These questions were specifically designed to gauge teacher levels of engagement and involvement with the outcomes designated by DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers of the REAL professional training program, as REAL training was provided for Preschool and Transition class teachers prior to the introduction of the Strong Beginnings 2007 curriculum document, as a framework for “characterising and being explicit about the critical elements of quality early childhood pedagogy” (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p 54).

The following prompt questions, asked during participant interviews, were designed to keep the conversation flow:

1. You have recently participated in a professional development program, REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers. What do you think was the official meaning of the term?
2. What do you think about this use of the term? Do you agree with it? Why?
3. Are there any ways in which you disagree with the intended meaning? If so, what are they? Why?
4. Is it important to you that you specifically address future schooling issues in your teaching practice?
5. How can you tell if you are successfully addressing those issues?
6. How can you tell when you are not successfully addressing them?
7. What are you trying to achieve in your teaching practice based on your learning from the REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers professional development program?
8. How realistic is this?
9. What would the implications for teaching and learning be if your teaching practice did not change?
10. Is there anything with regards to your participation in the REAL program that you wish to add?

The above section outlines the central research problem, the data analysis guiding questions and the prompt questions used during the participant interviews of this study. The next section focuses on the selection and characteristics of the study population, the interview questions and the data collection process itself.

4.4 STUDY POPULATION

In this study purposive sampling, a term that refers to “sampling in a deliberate way, with some purpose or focus in mind” was employed (Punch, 1998: p.193). This mode of sampling is consistent with the adopted interpretivist, qualitative approach to research, which uses small, information-rich samples selected to purposefully focus on issues (O’Donoghue, 2006). Purposive sampling was assessed to be most appropriate, given the form of central and guiding research questions, the time frame available and accessibility to participants. The procedure for the identification of the study population follows.

In the NT, the Education Advisory Council liaised with the Departments of Health, Community Services and Employment, Education and Training to sponsor a report All Children Have the Best Possible Start: A Framework for Action (2003) using OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001) and other international research, to inform and guide the planning and programming for all community early childhood education and care facilities. Subsequently the Early Years Framework (EYF) was developed by officers of the DEET (NT) (Northern Territory Government, 2007). Linked to this document was Strong Beginnings:
Supporting Best Practice in the Early Years Trial Draft, 2005), a document especially designed for early childhood educators to plan, program and teach learners in the pre-compulsory school age group, that is, Preschool and Transition children. Included in the EYF and as a response to the Australian Federal Government’s 2010 single intake policy mandate, an Age of Entry Trial (phase one commencing in January, 2004) was put into place (Curriculum Services Division, 2005).

A key element of the Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care report (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001: p.158) was a requirement for “appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision”. One form of appropriate training provision for teachers in NT Preschools and Transition classes, REAL professional development learning program was created, to assist participants in the “identification and development of common understandings about the skills, processes and advantages of building strong relationships and partnerships for the creation of conducive, challenging and supportive learning environments” especially for the younger child now entering Preschool and school (Curriculum Services Division, 2005).

The main aim of the study was to collect data from participants of the REAL professional development training program through face-to-face interviews, after their three-day attendance at the program and subsequent return to their respective teaching environments. The researcher forwarded a personal invitation to all seventy-two REAL participants, through electronic mail, to participate in such an interview. The invitation included a detailed explanation of the nature and purpose of the study and an assurance that ethics clearance from the University of the Sunshine Coast, as well as that of the DEET (NT) had been obtained. Participants were given the option of contacting the researcher to arrange for mutually suitable face-to-face interview times. Only nine early childhood practitioners volunteered to be interviewed for this study.

Several similarities of age, training and experience surfaced within this participant group. All nine participants are mothers who have brought up their children whilst continuing with their chosen teaching profession. Their average age was, at the time of commencement of the study, fifty years, with two participants having already made plans for imminent retirement. Each participant had been teaching for twenty years or
longer. Initial teacher training for each participant was between 1970 and 1985 and seven of the nine had chosen specifically to train and teach at the early childhood level. Teacher training programs during those years entailed a minimum of three years with the option of a fourth year to qualify for a Bachelor of Education degree. Three of the nine participants held the four year Bachelor degree. All participants impressed the researcher with their commitment to the demanding pace of teaching, acknowledging that they had become accustomed to the demands of teaching. During initial conversations with each participant it became apparent that there was a collective concern over the escalating pace of change in which they felt they had little control.

Following initial contact with four teachers who had completed the REAL professional development training, interviews were arranged immediately and conducted in various locations, with the use of a digital voice recorder. One interview was conducted long distance, over the telephone. As the researcher was not permitted to personally contact prospective participants, a significant time lapse occurred before the remaining participants were identified. With the exemplification of the study population completed, the next aspect of the research methodology, the data gathering, commenced.

4.5 DATA GATHERING
4.5.1 Qualitative Interviewing
Mason (1996) uses the term qualitative interviewing as referring to in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured forms of interviewing. Burgess, in Mason (1996) calls them “conversations with a purpose”. Mason (1996: p.36) suggests that qualitative interviewing is a legitimate way to generate data, as it allows the researcher to interact with people and to gain access to their accounts and articulations. O’Donoghue (2006) suggests that the purpose of any qualitative research is to

[A]rrive at appropriate down-to-earth questions such that they will yield a quantity and quality of data which, when subjected to analysis, will allow us to generate theory regarding the participants’ perspectives (O’Donoghue, 2006: p.37).
In this case open-ended questions were formulated, to help the researcher understand teacher perspectives on the changes in their pedagogy as a result of participation in the specified professional development program, REAL. The interview questions were underpinned by the principles of the social theory of symbolic interactionism, where individuals and societies develop interaction with symbols that represent the basis of social life (Hargreaves, 1993). In individual, face-to-face interviews, teachers elaborated on perceived changes in their teaching practice and gave thought to the professional development in which they had participated. They were also able to articulate how they managed (or did not manage) to make changes in their pedagogy.

People are valuable data sources, in the sense that human beings are repositories of knowledge, evidence and experience. It was assumed that data collection through the use of interviews enabled multiple meanings or constructions to be sought from the participants’ responses to the interview questions. The opportunity to interview over a period of time offered the advantage of the researcher being able to move back and forth in time to construct the past, understand the present and predict the future, access what the program organisers could not, gather information somewhat systematically and gain new insights and perceptions (O’Donoghue, 2006).

In this study, the type of interview used was a standard open-ended one, aimed at helping the researcher see situations as the participants saw them and clarify the meanings participants attributed to these situations. At the start of each interview, participants were briefed on how their responses would be transcribed and analysed for findings that would capture their perspectives. Interview questions were designed to ascertain the participants’ perspectives on how they had managed new knowledge from the REAL training program to change or enhance their pedagogy. The participants were advised that these findings would be made available to DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers, who may wish to use the findings for the enhancement of future professional development training programs. All participants were made fully aware of the purpose and aims of the research through an initial telephone or personal discussion and the provision of a detailed Research Project Information Sheet.
During the course of this initial discussion, the researcher formulated questions in a conversational mode to create an informal tone and to assume a collegial and caring attitude towards the prospective participants. The initial, informal questions included: “Can you think of three things you’ve learned from your participation in modules 1 and 2 of the REAL Learning for the Early Years professional development training program? Are there any things you didn’t like? Are there any things you didn’t relate to? Are there any things you didn’t find useful?” Comments from these conversations were briefly noted to assist in formulating the guiding and prompt questions.

Upon agreeing to participate in the research, each participant was required to sign a Consent to Participate in the Research Project form. Permission was sought from participants to record the interview using a digital voice recorder. Each participant was asked the same set of guiding questions, the sequence and form of which were altered if participant answers led into another more relevant question. It was necessary in some instances to probe more deeply or to rephrase a question if it became apparent that the question had not been fully understood. Probing questions were used and interview scripts were transcribed verbatim in their entirety.

### 4.5.2 Data Transcription

The following extract serves as a sample of an interview transcript:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P 1</th>
<th>R = Researcher</th>
<th>pd = professional development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P = Participant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**R**

You have recently participated in a professional development program, *REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers*. What do you think was the official meaning of the term?

**P**

*Preparing for the real world. Relationships, Environments, Activities and Language. How we use these relationships in our classrooms*

**R**

What do you think about this use of the term? Do you agree with it?

**P**

*I do agree. To be a good teacher we need to look at what’s happening in children’s lives. This is where teachers are going. Not doing our job otherwise*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>R</strong></th>
<th>Are there any ways in which you disagree with the intended meaning? If so, what are they?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>P</strong></td>
<td>Definitely. That’s what teaching is all about, to prepare children for their futures. On future issues: lots more assistance is needed; we could do lots more if we had more assistance. There’s a changing child; at Transition level we still have them in our hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R</strong></td>
<td>Is it important to you that you specifically address future schooling issues in your teaching practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P</strong></td>
<td>If my children are happy, achieving, wanting to learn, giving their best, then they are achieving and I’m achieving. Some days it’s me - I’m not happy; then I don’t feel I’m successful. Happy relationships are what matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R</strong></td>
<td>What are you trying to achieve in your teaching practice based on your learning from the REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers professional development program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P</strong></td>
<td>Relationships: I’m achieving. I could involve the community. Children thrive on one-to-one. Parents are harder to get as most of them go to work; getting help from elsewhere would be good. Environment: it depends on the architecture and its restrictions. I’m doing the best I can. I’ve got a good environment. I’ve also got the garden area next to my room. I couldn’t cope in one of the other rooms. Activities: I have an activity-based program. I do activities all the time and I’ve included lots more play time. Language: I’m working on making my program more play based. I still struggle with the academic pressure, to teach English and Maths formally. I did learn from the pd. When you come back timelines and other influences do take over and you go back to your old ways. In many ways the pd makes me feel inadequate. What ‘they’ say doesn’t come across in reality. I think you have the real world in your classroom I have my personal interpretation from the pd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R</strong></td>
<td>What would the implications for teaching and learning be if your teaching practice did not change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P</strong></td>
<td>I see the benefits of making changes and keeping up with them. I still have lots to do. I have to have happiness in what I’m doing. Life’s too short. If it wasn’t fun I wouldn’t want to be there</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Sample of Interview Transcript

The researcher attempted to remain neutral to the participants’ responses whilst showing interest in what was being communicated.
The following table shows the structure and sequence of the questions asked at the interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1</th>
<th>You have recently participated in a professional development program, <em>REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers</em>. What do you think was the official meaning of the term?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>What do you think about this use of the term? Do you agree with it? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3</td>
<td>Are there any ways in which you disagree with the intended meaning? If so, what are they? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4</td>
<td>Is it important to you that you specifically address future schooling issues in your teaching practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5</td>
<td>How can you tell if you are successfully addressing those issues?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 6</td>
<td>How can you tell when you are not successfully addressing them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 7</td>
<td>What changes have you put in place as a result of attending <em>REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers</em> professional development program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 8</td>
<td>What are you trying to achieve in your teaching practice based on your learning from the <em>REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers</em> professional development program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 9</td>
<td>What would the implications for teaching and learning be if your teaching practice did not change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 10</td>
<td>Is there anything with regards to your participation in the REAL program that you wish to add?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Structure and Sequence of Interview Questions**

The opening question (Question 1) was a deliberate search for participant understandings of the acronym *REAL*, the relationship of each acronym component and the program’s intended outcomes. Questions 2 and 3 gave participants opportunity to re-focus on the sequence of events and activities of the *REAL* professional development training program. Questions 4, 5 and 6, transition questions, initiated the concept of future schooling and its related change requirements. These questions linked to the guiding questions 1 and 2, designed to gauge participant awareness and interest in pedagogy change. The key prompt questions 7 and 8 focussed on the strategies that participants used to make changes in their current pedagogy and the anticipated outcomes of such changes. They provided a further link to guiding question 1 and developed understandings of each participant’s intention and level of engagement in any change process. Question 9 addressed the participants’ personal perspectives of pedagogical change and linked to guiding questions 3 and 4, in which information was sought relevant to the significance each participant placed on pedagogy change. The final question, question 10, brought closure to the interview and afforded further opportunity for participants to add information. These questions tried to elicit the participants’
perspectives on how they were able to gain the necessary knowledge, capacities and understandings to address increasing classroom complexities and if and how they were able to make relevant shifts in their practice as a result of their participation in an appropriate professional development training program.

The process involved in the collection of this data through guiding questions is consistent with the interpretivist qualitative research method. The data analysis undertaken in order to formulate theoretical propositions related to teacher perspectives on their participation in professional development training programs is explained in considerable detail in the following section.

4.6 DATA ANALYSIS
4.6.1 Perceived Research Outcomes
When using qualitative methods of data collection the researcher must move from a description of what is the case to an explanation of why that is the case, as claimed by Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) in an attempt to construct a rational and succinct explanation of the perceived research outcomes. Kreuger (2003) claims that practical, systematic and verifiable data analysis should be used in a qualitative research study. The term verifiable may appear questionable, but it consists of the most insightful manner in which to bring to the fore a systematic approach to the meaning being adopted by participants, as it is impossible to verify data accurately in qualitative research studies.

Due to this type of research being grounded in human social behaviour, its theoretical perspective, symbolic interactionism, places primary importance on the many social meanings that people attach to their world. Social meanings cannot in themselves be construed as verifiable analysis of data. Researchers working within an interpretivist, inductive qualitative research methodology such as this, place more emphasis on tacit or intuitive knowledge as legitimate knowledge (Gall, Gall and Borg, 2003). It is therefore the ideas, feelings, processes and actions resulting from human beings socially interacting with one another and the investigation of teacher perspectives that provide the data for this study. Both agreement and disagreement among the participants’ perspectives informed the researcher’s analysis of the interview data.
The main theoretical propositions of the study emerged through inference and interpretation of the collected and transcribed data.

4.6.2 Data Analysis Process

The process of transcribing, coding, analysing, categorising and identifying theoretical propositions of this study follows Maxwell’s (1996: p.79) process of contextualising which includes categorising interview transcript data by coding, re-arranging data to define and develop a theoretical concept and identifying connections between categories and themes.

In this research, the entire segment of each interview transcript was read through and edited, in search of meaningful segments to interpret. Additional memos and notes were added, prompting the process of questioning to clarify what was being said, what it related to, what it represented and what similarities or differences could be linked to it. During the reading of each transcript, relevant and significant phrases, sentences or segments of interview data were identified as information bytes. Each information byte was labelled with a corresponding concept e.g. approving content, identifying constraints and displaying characteristics, thereby attributing a “class of phenomena to a segment of text” (Miles and Huberman, 1994: p. 57).

The grouping and summarising of the data were based on the researcher’s inferential and experiential knowledge of the local dynamics. It is from this grouping and summarising that distinct concepts and motives emerged. In many instances there were multiple occurrences of the phenomena referred to above. A constant search for patterns and structures assisted in connecting thematic categories and facilitated the comparison and clustering of concepts, labelled descriptive coding and inferential coding. These recurring themes took the data analysis process to a more abstract level of interpretation, in order to “illustrate[s] an emergent leitmotiv or pattern” (Miles and Huberman, 1994: p. 56).

The recurring themes of this study, the “meaningful segments to interpret”, included teacher recognition and acceptance or rejection of the purpose of the REAL professional development program, teacher expectations of a professional
development program to meet their pedagogical needs and teacher perceptions of addressing future schooling issues in their current teaching practice.

The focus on these more abstract issues and concerns led to the establishment of perspectives and the formulation of five sub-theoretical propositions, connecting the categories of descriptive and inferential coding. These sub-theoretical propositions were then embedded into three main interrelated theoretical propositions representing the key perspectives of early years’ teachers regarding their teaching practice, in ways commensurate with their recent professional development training.

The tables below illustrate the data analysis process outlined in the preceding section:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Information Bytes</th>
<th>Descriptive Coding</th>
<th>Inferential Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21/12/06</td>
<td>When you have 25 four and a half year olds, turning five, there will be behaviour problems. That’s the main thing to work on. Parents need to be satisfied their child is going to be safe in that learning environment. Once children can work well together socially and bullying has been sorted out, then children are free to learn. When you’ve got children on traffic lights and you’re monitoring them every half hour to see if they’re doing the right thing … it’s difficult to do that … 24 children are looking after themselves while you’re counselling one (or five, which I had this year -2006).</td>
<td>- Linking classroom and children’s social life - Awareness of characteristics of effective early childhood learning environment - Constraint – insufficient assistance in early childhood classroom</td>
<td>Early Childhood teachers have preferred, personal interpretations of the term best practice ORG.CONS Early Childhood teachers acknowledge existence of social realities in current classroom practice ORG.CONS Early Childhood teachers identify constraints that insufficient resources have been provided to assist in the implementation of program’s ideas and concepts ORG.CONS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Teacher Responses to Organisational Aspects of REAL Professional Development Program

Responses of teachers in early years’ settings to the content of the REAL professional development program
**Participant 4 25/01/07 Interview Transcript**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Bytes</th>
<th>Descriptive Coding</th>
<th>Inferential Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you agree with the terms and with the purpose of the REAL professional development program? Yes, I do. I think it worked well and I think they did well. They worked step by step. They started with Relationships and they talked about how to build relationships. I actually came in at the Environment part. I was quite impressed with what they were doing there.</td>
<td>... I think it worked well and I think they did well… … I was quite impressed with what they were doing there</td>
<td>Early Childhood teachers appreciate prescribed professional development training program content PD.CON Early Childhood teachers make connections with professional development program’s ideas and concepts and own practice PD.CON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would there be anything that you would disagree with? Perhaps that it was too ambitious or that it wasn’t purposeful? They had a couple of speakers and some material that I didn’t find relevant.</td>
<td>a couple of speakers and some material that I didn’t find relevant</td>
<td>Early Childhood teachers identify some irrelevance of professional development program components PD.CON</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4: Teacher Responses to Content of REAL Professional Development Program**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses of teachers in early years’ settings to concepts of their commitment to being change agents.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant 5 12/4/07</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think that the enthusiasm that everyone had towards taking on a whole lot of new ideas … well, new ideas, but ideas that they probably had but … how they could improve the actual environments the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

74
they felt that they were now being given permission to put into practice ideas of how they could improve the actual environments the children ... or ways that they could move forward in.

and care programs - Characteristics of effective early childhood learning environment
- Characteristics of young children’s future work and learning needs
- Characteristics of skilled early childhood teachers
- Characteristics of teacher as change agent
- Linking classroom and children’s social life

Table 5: Teacher Responses to Concepts of Commitment to Being Change Agents

The completion of the inferential coding of all transcripts and the subsequent pattern coding enabled the clustering of recurring themes related to the early years’ teachers’ perspectives of the policies, the organisational content and the implication for change after their participation in relevant professional development training. This level of coding of teacher perspectives led to the formulation of five sub-theoretical propositions, one of which is listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-theoretical proposition #1</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers in early childhood settings approve in principle DEET NT’s policies on a single age of entry into school but deem that their particular circumstances pose constraints to implementing these policies. POL.CONS</td>
<td>Policy characteristics High profile (Federal Government mandate) School reform potential Policy constraints Imposed implementation (resentment, apprehension) Implied <em>trial</em> focus Implicit outcomes (hidden agenda) Misuse of research Teacher resistance, reluctance Teachers without early childhood qualifications in early childhood settings Resentment toward policy imposition Apprehension toward enforced implementation Policy response Multi-level interpretations Advantage for teachers with appropriate qualifications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Sub-theoretical Proposition #1 Coding

4.7 THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS FORMULATION
The five sub-theoretical propositions were merged to formulate a conjunction of three main interrelated theoretical propositions that succinctly portrayed the perspectives of early years’ teachers regarding their perspectives on their teaching practice, in ways commensurate with the professional development training program in which they had participated.

4.7.1 Theoretical Proposition One Statement
Teachers in early childhood settings approve in principle of a single Age of Entry [into school] policy, with its associated REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers professional development training program, but identify feelings of apprehension and resentment towards the policy being inclusive of an early Age of Entry [into school] and toward the lack of organisational support provided to implement this policy.

4.7.2 Theoretical Proposition Two Statement
Teachers in early childhood settings acknowledge that rapid social and generational classroom changes pose personal and pedagogical constraints, which influence their conceptual interpretation of the term best practice, an interpretation that appears to be at odds with REAL professional development program organisers.

4.7.3 Theoretical Proposition Three Statement
Teachers in early childhood settings deem their particular circumstances to influence both their perspectives of future schooling and their level of commitment to being early childhood education pedagogical change agents following their participation in the REAL professional development training program.

4.8 ETHICS AND POLITICS OF RESEARCH
4.8.1 Trustworthiness
Lincoln and Guba (1985: p. 319) state that an audit trail is a key component of a study in which theory is generated from data transcripts and constructed categories. O’Donoghue (2006: pp.99-100) claims that an audit trail demonstrates the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the study. Issues relating to these trustworthiness criteria are concerned with the level of confidence that can be attached to the outcome of the study and the extent to which the research report can be believed.
**Credibility** refers to the truthfulness of the data. In this study participants were given verbatim transcripts of their interview responses, for comment, clarification and confirmation. Interpretation of the interview data was thus checked and reviewed as necessary. The credibility of this study is further enhanced by the fact that the researcher is also an early childhood teacher-educator with many years’ expertise and experience, who is well able to relate to the issues facing early childhood teachers.

**Transferability** refers to the transfer of research findings to other contexts. Lincoln and Guba (1985: p.100) claim that it is possible to generate and transfer theories based on interpretation and judgements to other contexts if detailed interview data supports those interpretations and judgements. In this study, the findings and judgements from interview transcript data and memos provided the criteria on which logical theoretical propositions were formed. Whilst the cohort was small, it did generate a rich data base.

**Dependability** refers to the consistency of the findings within the study and the development of a visible *audit trail* with which to demonstrate the stability of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: p.100). The *audit trail* in this study allows the reader to clearly see the path taken by the researcher and the trustworthiness of the outcomes (O’Donoghue, 2006).

**Confirmability** is defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985: p.100) as “the extent to which the data and interpretations of the study are grounded in events rather than the inquirer’s personal constructions”. In this study the theoretical propositions formed are directly related to the interview data and all inferences made are supported objectively by relevant data.

4.8.2 Ethical Considerations
Ethics approval to conduct a research project was obtained from the University of the Sunshine Coast, DEET (NT) and from Curriculum Services Division organisers of the *REAL* professional training program. Participants of the professional development training program were invited by the organisers, through circulation e-mail, to respond to the researcher’s request for interview volunteers. Interview purpose and
procedures were explained to the respondents via e-mail or telephone and interview
dates were arranged at the respondents’ convenience. Prior to interview, participants
were given a detailed letter of information. They were also required to sign a consent
form. Names were not used in interview transcripts and all participants were assured
of the utmost confidentiality and anonymity of their contributions. Tape scripts and
transcripts of interviews have been securely stored by the researcher from the
inception of this research.

4.9 CONCLUSION
This chapter has provided a detailed overview of the methodology adopted to design,
conduct and report the undertaken research. The methodological approach to data
collection and analysis was described and the positioning of the research within the
symbolic interactionism framework was discussed. Next, the central research
question, the guiding questions and the interview prompt questions were outlined,
together with a profile of the participants. This segment led to the description and
rationale for the qualitative data collection procedure, which involved the semi-
structured, face-to-face interviews and the gathering of data relevant to answering the
central research question. An explanation of the descriptive and inferential coding
strategies applied to information bytes from interview data was also given. The
emergence of five sub-theoretical propositions followed, with the subsequent
conjunction of three interrelated key theoretical propositions. Trustworthiness issues
relating to the research paradigm were then addressed and ethical considerations
arising from interview conversations were outlined.

The next three chapters delineate each of the three interrelated theoretical propositions
that emerged from the analysis of the data collected for this study. These are:

*Theoretical Proposition One Statement*
Teachers in early childhood settings approve in principle of a single *Age of Entry* [into
school] policy, with its associated *REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers*
professional development training program, but identify feelings of apprehension and
resentment towards the policy being inclusive of an early *Age of Entry* [into school]
and toward the lack of organisational support provided to implement this policy.
Theoretical Proposition Two Statement
Teachers in early childhood settings acknowledge that rapid social and generational classroom changes pose personal and pedagogical constraints, which influence their conceptual interpretation of the term best practice, an interpretation that appears to be at odds with REAL professional development program organisers.

Theoretical Proposition Three Statement
Teachers in early childhood settings deem their particular circumstances to influence both their perception of future schooling and their level of commitment to being pedagogy change agents.

The next chapter will therefore formulate the first of a set of three theoretical propositions regarding the perspectives of the study’s early childhood teacher participants.
Chapter 5: Theoretical Proposition One Statement

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study was designed to investigate the perspectives of early childhood teachers on how they managed changes to their teaching practice in the context of their exposure to appropriate professional development training programs. It encompasses what these teachers thought, believed, predicted, conceptualised and evaluated with regard to a specified professional development training program, REAL. This chapter outlines the first of three theoretical propositions derived from analysis of the verbatim interview transcripts of nine teachers who attended the professional development training program, REAL.

Theoretical Proposition One Statement

Teachers in early childhood settings approve in principle of a single Age of Entry [into school] policy, with its associated REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers professional development training program, but identify feelings of apprehension and resentment towards the policy being inclusive of an early Age of Entry [into school] and toward the lack of organisational support provided to implement this policy.

In this theoretical proposition, the following teacher perspectives repeatedly arise:

1. Teacher approval of the timely proposed implementation of a single Age of Entry into school policy to fulfil the Federal Government mandate for single age of entry into school across all Australian states and territories
2. Teacher satisfaction with components of the Age of Entry into school policy’s associated professional development training program, REAL
3. Teacher apprehension towards the single age of entry into school policy when it became apparent that the proposed single age represented an earlier (than current practice) age of entry into school
4. Teacher resentment toward the imposition of the inclusive early Age of Entry policy and its misleading reference to a trial
5. Teachers concerns over lack of organisational support in implementing the early Age of Entry policy.
Each of these perspectives: teacher approval, teacher satisfaction, teacher apprehension, teacher resentment and teacher concerns are detailed in the following section.

5.2 TEACHER APPROVAL OF SINGLE AGE OF ENTRY

Early childhood teachers in the NT have debated issues related to the most appropriate age of a child’s first entry into school over several decades. Prior to 1998 Preschool programs were available to all children turning four years of age within a given year and children were accepted into school in the year they turned five years of age. As many Preschools were located within school grounds, a relatively large number of children simply moved from their Preschool location into their adjoining school environment. In the NT this first school class, named Transition, represents the transition of children from informal structures of child care and preschool programs into the more formal structure of school. Transition class in the NT can be equated with the Reception or Kindergarten class of schools in other Australian states and the Australian Capital Territory. It was generally accepted that this was the first year of school for children turning five years of age. From Transition class, NT school children progress through Year One, Year Two and Year Three. These four years of schooling comprise the early childhood year levels of primary schools in the NT.

With the establishment of school autonomy in 1998, individual schools were given freedom to establish their own entry to school regulations and programs. Hence, prior to 2003, a lack of uniformity across the NT enabled parents to choose the school whose age of entry policy suited them best. Many schools chose to have several intakes during the school year, in January, April and July of any calendar year, whilst others enrolled, in a more restrictive manner, all children turning 5 years of age by end-June into school at the commencement of the school year. Still other schools chose only a January and July intake. For many teachers in Preschool and Transition classes this created excessive workloads and caused confusion amongst parents. Therefore, early childhood teachers welcomed the proposed Federal Government mandate for a national single age of entry policy, expressing approval of the timely implementation of a uniform age of entry policy into all schools across Australia.
The Federal Government’s mandate required that each state and territory education system conduct its own research and establish, within the seven year time frame leading to 2010 and in consultation with other states and territories, a uniform age of entry policy. The NT’s research and curriculum officers’ response to this challenge was formulated by the Early Years Review committee, as the Early Years Framework, with an accompanying Strong Beginnings resource document. These documents have been outlined and discussed in Chapter 4.

As stated at the outset, the early childhood teachers interviewed in this study generally expressed their approval and support for a single age of entry policy across the NT schools.

One teacher stated:

*I was really pleased to see that it was coming back in and really being supported by making policies.* (P6, p1)

Another teacher agreed that:

*Future schooling – it’s going to look very different to what we had in the last decade and I can see that if we do the right thing by these children, they’re going to have a lot of global issues that they’re going to be concerned with as adults. In order to deal with that, we’ve got to give them a really strong beginning.* (P2, p2, 3)

A further perspective was presented by Participant 2.

*I see that we could take Preschool forward into Transition and I can see that, with the very smart Year One teachers, teachers that have got their eyes open, they can grow what goes on in Transition in a formal way, what they see as formal education, that will be accepted by the parents, the Education Department, their principals, down on paper, in their accountability.*

(P2, p16)

Participant 6 expressed a developing awareness of the need for change, defining her Preschool’s community approach to the policy change in the following manner:

*We needed to make some changes. [Because of] the different nature of the way children would be entering school and it was important for us to do that planning with parents as well as the school and the child-care centres.* (P6, p5)

Through collegial consultation, Participant 6 adopted a cohesive and creative approach to the changed entry to school ages.

*We’ve had to change the hours that children are at Preschool to accommodate [parents]… all children to have the same amount of time spent at Preschool...*
and we need to deal with some of the difficulties of children within the community who come from child-care. Actually, we’ve had to look at ways of getting up our hours … and also to consider the needs of teachers as well. (P6, p5)

These views clearly support the theme identified in the research that teachers approve and support the introduction of a single age of entry policy across the NT schools.

5.3 TEACHER SATISFACTION WITH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM CONTENT

Early childhood teachers, who attended the professional development training program, REAL, generally spoke favourably of the program’s content. Attendance at professional development training programs often creates apprehension amongst teachers, who bring to that training session an imposed assumption that they need to learn new concepts and that there is an expectation to implement, on their return, immediate changes in their current practice.

The teachers who attended REAL expressed pleasure and surprise that the program’s content reinforced what they already perceived to be sound early childhood pedagogy. One participant, who was initially reluctant to attend, expressed her surprise and delight thus:

* I didn’t expect that I would enjoy the session. However, I walked away feeling very different. I found that the sessions were particularly well organised … there was lots of variety … I felt that there was lots of valuable information provided, that it wasn’t new but it did reinforce what I was already doing … and so I was perhaps prepared to go along to the next session. (P8, p1-2)

This view was reinforced by Participant 6, who showed pleasure and surprise at what she experienced during REAL.

* I was pleasantly surprised and really thrilled to see what was coming out because I had become quite disillusioned with some of the way, the way I saw preschool was going and this was a great thing to see because it followed a lot of my own ideas about teaching. (P6, p1)

Two participants noted their satisfaction with what they believed to be the inclusion of sound early childhood education pedagogy.

* I was going to say that it justified the way early childhood teachers, particularly preschool teachers, have been teaching and the kind of philosophy that we’ve been using for years, I think (P5, p1).
It was just refreshing and boosted my enthusiasm ... It also reinforces what we were already doing and that we were on the right track (P7, p5).

For one teacher there was some irrelevance of content, representing a waste of time. She believed that time could have been utilised more productively.

_They had a couple of speakers and some material that I didn’t find relevant._ (P4, p1)

**REAL** was regarded by Participant 2 as an opportunity to reintroduce and reinforce play-based programs, as opposed to those with heavy traditional literacy and numeracy emphases. Participant 2 believed that it is in play-based programs that the real work of children can take place, expressing the opinion that:

**REAL means getting back to the real work of children** (P2, p1).

*We can get greater results from doing things that aren’t traditionally literacy activities or numeracy activities.* (P2, p13)

_To do this in-servicing brings teachers to this play idea and what play really is._ (P2, p2)

Of great satisfaction to many teachers was the collegial sharing of information and ideas and the subsequent establishment of networks within the schools of those early childhood teachers who attended. Given that some teachers were reluctant to attend **REAL**, the following comments add support to their favourable acceptance of the program’s content. Attendance at **REAL** was generally considered to be an educative and collaborative experience, giving opportunity for busy teachers to meet at a venue well separated from the classroom and to share on a professional level. Two teachers expressed their satisfaction with being able to view the work of other teachers.

_They had set up opportunities to network and just to see what other schools were doing in their programs_ (P4, p1).

_The thing I personally valued the most were opportunities to share with colleagues_ (P9, p4).

Research inclusion in **REAL** was significant for P6, who admitted to having a longer-than-desirable length of time away from her initial college teacher training and formal studies.

_Well, I enjoyed having, looking at a lot of different people who’ve done research and impressing different outlooks of teaching or philosophies. That
was great because having been out of college for so long it was great to see new research and to read it and to hear it in practice (P6, p2).

Teachers in their busy teaching days, sometimes spending nights and weekends planning and preparing, are not often given opportunity to share ideas and information with colleagues. Participant 5 was especially pleased to be given this opportunity during her attendance at REAL.

One of the particular things I liked about it was the ability to share information and ideas with other teachers (P5, p3).

I think that the enthusiasm that everyone had towards taking on a whole lot of new ideas ... well, new ideas that they probably had but they felt that they were now being given permission to put into practice ideas of how they could improve the actual environments the children ... or ways that they could move forward in (P5, p4).

Many teachers alluded to the appropriateness of the professional development training program’s title acronym REAL, considering Relationships and Partnerships, Environments, Active Learning Approach and Language Development to be key factors in sound early childhood practice. Several teachers recognised these factors to be not only appropriate and desirable, but essential components of sound early childhood practice.

To be honest, it’s not a bad way of putting everything that is important in early childhood education. But I’d also like to say that it encapsulates ... everything that we considered important and that we thought that we were doing anyway; that relationships were important and that environments were important, very important and active learning and the language is something it really covered (P7, p1).

Well, it was an acronym ... I have to say that they’re concepts that we constantly think about here and we constantly try to build or find better ways anyway (P9, p1).

Expressed in dictionary definition terms (real – having an absolute and necessary and not merely contingent existence, Oxford Dictionary, 4th edition), the title REAL amused several participants, who recognised its greater depth and breadth of meaning.

I thought it was very catchy! That these are real life experiences. I guess that children ... that this is how children learn best, especially in their early years (P5, p1).

Preparing for the real world; Relationships, Environments, Activities and Language; How we use these relationships in our classrooms (P1, p1).
Because of her prior involvement in the consultative process of the Early Years Review, Participant 2 was favourably committed to the development of the *Age of Entry Trial*. Her positive response to a question related to the acronym *REAL* demonstrates her desire for all participants to share the vision of creating child oriented programs.

_More importantly, the REAL means that we’re looking at the children themselves and starting to give them what they really need* (P2, p1).

Participant 4 spoke enthusiastically about the recall session, at the end of 2006, during which she experienced a strong sense of community and encouragement through the networks built during the Term 1 *REAL* program. In a telephone conversation preceding the formal interview, Participant 4 alluded to the high level of support given by the program organisers during the two-day program modules.

Based on this analysis it can be concluded that all teacher participants expressed high levels of satisfaction with the content of the *REAL* professional development training program.

### 5.4 TEACHER APPREHENSION ABOUT AN EARLIER AGE OF ENTRY

Despite initial feelings of approval and support for the single *Age of Entry* policy, there were also feelings of apprehension towards its introduction. This apprehension was directed at the suggested earlier age of a child’s entry both into Preschool (at three and a half years of age) and Transition class (at four and a half years of age).

By way of explanation of this policy, it was the task of the *Early Years Review Committee*, established by DEET (NT), to ensure that NT schools comply with the Australian Federal Government’s requirements for a nationally consistent single school intake policy.

_In expectation of national requirements being mandated by 2010, the Age of Entry Trial has been developed to ensure NT schools are on track with respect to the Australian Government’s requirements for all states and territories to move to a nationally consistent single intake policy for Transition* (Curriculum Services Division, 2005).

From this committee came the *Age of Entry Trial*, in which all NT schools were invited to participate. Although its title suggests it was a *trial* and teachers believed schools to have choices, this was later understood by the participants to be their
perception of the term trial only. It soon became apparent that schools were only given options about when and not if, they would commence the trial.

The trial involved schools shifting to a single intake for Transition students in the following manner:

- Children who turn five on or by 30 June may begin in Transition at the beginning of Term 1 of that year.
- Children who turn four on or by 30 June may begin in Preschool at the beginning of Term 1 of that year.

It was at this stage that feelings of apprehension were detected and concerns were expressed by many Preschool and Transition class teachers.

Participant 2’s prior involvement in the consultative process of the Age of Entry Trial, followed by several years as director of a Preschool enabled her to better understand the magnitude of the Age of Entry Trial undertaking. She expressed the opinion:

*The Education Department has a big job ahead of them … this, I think, is to have the real impetus of saying, ‘wake up, this is for real. This is what we’ve been doing and I hope that works’* (P2, p1).

Participant 2 also expressed an awareness of the inevitability of the Age of Entry Trial, referring to her willingness to support the trial in principle in this manner:

*That was one of the things I tried in the second year of the Age of Entry Trial* (P2, p7).

Participant 3 expressed concern over the inevitability of behavioural problems and possible safety issues arising from the younger age of the children entering school.

*When you have twenty-five four and a half year olds, turning five, there will be behaviour problems.*
*Parents need to be satisfied their child is going to be safe in that learning environment* (P3, p2).

Included in documents distributed to participants prior to their attendance at the REAL modules was a reference to the fact that the Early Years Review and Age of Entry Trial were developed through consultation and extensive research.

*The Department of Employment, Education and Training’s review of the policy for Preschool and Transition enrolment began in 2003 through*
consultation with principals, school councils, early childhood educators, professional organisations, parents and school communities across the Territory. The consultation took place in conjunction with extensive research on the broad issues of quality approaches for the Early Years (0 – 8 years of age) (Curriculum Services Division, 2005).

Participant 3 was sceptical of the research base that preceded the decision to implement the Age of Entry Trial.

*We’re told all this is wonderful. Well, research can prove anything it … wants to.* (P3, p1)

Participant 6’s earlier comment was vehemently refuted by Participant 3, who insisted that research could be used in any manner to meet the researcher’s own ends.

*Well, I enjoyed having, looking at a lot of different people who’ve done research and impressing different outlooks of teaching or philosophies. That was great because having been out of college for so long it was great to see new research and to read it and to hear it in practice.* (P6, p2)

For Participant 3 the use of the statement ‘consultation took place in conjunction with extensive research on the broad issues’ led to a level of cynicism about the addition of such a phrase to any document.

In the following instance, Participant 2 refers to her concern that the earlier age of entry into Preschool and Transition classes will present difficulties for those teachers not holding early childhood education qualifications.

*The Education Department has a big job ahead of them, with so many early childhood teachers not coming from necessarily early childhood backgrounds.* (P2, p10)

From a qualified early childhood teacher’s perspective, the above issue is expressed conversely by Participant 5, who suggests that early childhood teachers should not have great difficulties with the earlier age of entry into Preschool.

*I was going to say that it justified the way early childhood teachers, particularly Preschool teachers, have been teaching and the kind of philosophies that we’ve been using for years.* (P5, p1)

It is possible that, because of her prior position as committee member for the Early Years Review, Participant 2 revealed greater concerns over the implementation of the
Age of Entry Trial into a school, deeming it essential that all teachers within that school understand and support the trial if it is to be manageable and effective.

We need them to understand what this really valid, valuable stuff that the early childhood teachers are doing (P2, p10).

Prior to attendance, the early childhood teachers involved in this study were only partially aware of the implications of their participation in the professional development training program, REAL. Information relating to the Age of Entry Trial had been presented to school principals, who informed Preschool and Transition teachers in their schools of the proposed Age of Entry policy. Most of these teachers did not articulate any personal or professional commitment to the new Age of Entry policy and only became more informed about this policy during their compulsory attendance at REAL.

One teacher recognised the information and strategies presented to her through her attendance at REAL and the accompanying benefits.

A lot of good things came out of it. Attention was drawn to the needs of early age of entry children (P3, p2).

Participants 7 and 8 demonstrated their ability to accept the Age of Entry Trial and adapt their programs and teaching practice to meet its challenges. Even before their attendance at REAL professional development training program, their acceptance of the inevitability of the Age of Entry Trial resulted in innovative and creative programming.

When we were forced into this early entry, we, I think managed very well at adapting our program to these younger children, changed our expectations and starting with the child and where they were at when they came into Preschool (P7, p5).

The feelings towards the Age of Entry Trial evidenced amongst the participants were various and diverse. The majority of these expressed feelings revealed apprehension, which included:

- concerns over the magnitude and implications of the Age of Entry Trial
- assumed fears of future classroom behaviour problems
- assumed problems in the requirement for teachers who did not have adequate early childhood qualifications to undertake the Age of Entry Trial and
- doubts in the validity of research upon which the Age of Entry Trial was based.

However, no consensus exists across the sample of this study. Some participants expressed a cautious willingness to consider the policy favourably, through innovative and creative adoption of the trial, while others were apprehensive about its introduction into their well established and favoured teaching style and setting.

5.5 TEACHER RESENTMENT ABOUT USE OF TERM TRIAL

Of the early childhood teachers interviewed, most believed that the Age of Entry Trial was not optional and therefore could not correctly be named a trial. This generated feelings of resentment amongst Preschool and Transition class teachers. Whilst the trial was staged over a three year period, it soon became evident that fifty-three NT schools were required to cooperate and participate in the trial by the year 2007.

An overwhelming sense of betrayal surfaced amongst those teachers who were required to attend. One participant belatedly recognised that REAL professional development training program had both an explicit and implicit agenda. In her interview Participant 3 expressed her disgust:

*It's all really about early Age of Entry children* (P3, p1).

For some participants the lack of consultation or involvement in original discussions relating to the policy’s introduction raised feelings of anger towards those who were implementing the program,

*Because it seems overwhelming; partly because I still feel very opposed to the earlier age of entry* (P4, p4).

*When we were forced into this early entry* (P7, p5).

Even though this is a study about early childhood teachers and their perspectives in relation to the introduction of specified professional development training, school principals also came in for criticism from the teachers involved. School principals were instrumental in facilitating the Age of Entry Trial at their respective schools and in ensuring that the respective teachers attended the professional development training program, REAL. The fact that school principals were therefore seen to be compliant
to DEET (NT), giving teachers no choice in the matter of attending REAL is expressed by several participants:

*It was compulsory for one of our staff to attend* (P8, p1).

*We constantly try to build or find better ways anyway, without having to have a seminar to discuss them* (P9, p1).

*We’ve made the changes long before REAL. I had the opportunity to be working in the situation for two and a half years before we attended the REAL seminars* (P9, p3).

Participant 2 was especially concerned that school principals, so involved in ensuring teacher attendance at REAL, later showed minimal involvement in assisting the very teachers who now had to implement the new policy. Given that school principals were delegated by DEET (NT) to inform their Preschool and Transition teachers of the Age of Entry Trial and to facilitate those teachers’ attendance at REAL, it was their lack of further involvement that posed immediate questions and caused later frustrations for these teachers. Participant 2 believed there was a need for school administrators to also attend REAL in order to facilitate understandings about the introduction of the new policy across NT schools.

*No principal … no, excuse me…[one] principal sent a senior teacher, an Early Childhood senior and another teacher, to the REAL, but other than that they were all Age of Entry school people that were going from down here and we need to take it further into the school* (P2, p10).

*But principals, dear me, we do need our principals on side for this* (P2, p10).

Participant 2 did, however show a generosity of spirit toward some school principals during the Age of Entry Trial, expressing a favourable view of those principals who had some understanding of early childhood pedagogy.

*If they’ve had previous experience in early childhood … they’re much more open* (P2, p11).

Further resentment was expressed by Participant 9, who was disappointed that only minimal opportunity was given, both prior to and during the training program, for contribution of her own and others’ teaching expertise. This suggested a negative ‘them and / or us’ attitude, reflecting a distancing between the office-based organisers of REAL and the school-based teachers.
I guess within the seminar itself I was disappointed that we didn’t have more opportunity to discuss any of the changes we’d made or even present those changes to other people who may also find them helpful in terms of changes they make in their practice as teachers and thinking about the different age groups that we need to incorporate in our schools (P9, p3).

To some extent, the resentful feelings expressed, especially by Preschool teachers, may have some foundation in the apparent threat on the Age of Entry Trial to these teachers’ long-enjoyed level of autonomy in their Preschool positions. NT preschools, prior to the introduction of the Age of Entry Trial, have experienced great decision-making freedom with regard to student enrolment, implementation of programs and the purchase of resources. Although early childhood teachers are only too aware of constant change in their teaching environments, the changes imposed upon them with the Age of Entry Trial and REAL professional development training program created a series of expressed resentments and frustrations towards its imposition and intrusion into their well-established and favoured form of teaching practice.

5.6 TEACHER CONCERNS OVER LACK OF CONTINUED ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT

Participants stated that, prior to their attendance at REAL they had limited awareness of the level of ongoing support that would be needed for effective Age of Entry Trial implementation. The acronym REAL implies the professional development program to be beneficial for all early childhood educators. It was, therefore, assumed that teachers could be given choices about attendance, as was the case in all professional development programs presented annually to teachers in the NT. However, it was realised that this was not the case. REAL was specifically designed for those teachers in early childhood settings who would be involved with the Age of Entry Trial and only these teachers were expected to attend. As stated previously, Participant 3 observed that REAL had both explicit and implicit outcomes.

It's all really about Early Age of Entry children and their stage of development (P3, p1).

Another participant recognised the compulsory aspect of the policy’s introduction:

It was compulsory for one of our staff to attend (P7, p4).
During interview sessions several participants referred to the importance of ongoing education departmental and school support, stating categorically that in their particular circumstances such support was either limited or non-existent. One teacher did not readily accept the project officers’ attempt to ‘sell’ their product.

*We’re told all this is wonderful. Basically we’re not supported* (P3, p1).

Several teachers envisaged the limitations in effective implementation of the *Age of Entry Trial* if support, in the guise of classroom assistance, was not forthcoming.

*That’s what teaching is all about, to prepare children for their futures. Future issues: lots more assistance needed; could do lots more if we had more assistance* (P1, p1).

*If people really supported early years education they’d put their money where their mouth is* (P3, p1).

*The provision of extra adults has been overlooked* (P3, p1).

Participant 1 expressed her concerns that attendance at professional development programs created temporary gains in knowledge, understandings and skills. These gains diminish upon return to the ‘real world’ of the classroom, unless time is made for assimilation and implementation of such knowledge, understandings and skills.

For some teachers, involvement in professional development programs also initiated feelings of inadequacy and detachment. Prior experience led them to believe that what is displayed in an ideological, surreal fashion away from the classroom is often difficult to reproduce inside the real world of the classroom.

*I did learn from the PD [professional development]. When you come back timelines and other influences do take over and you go back to your old ways. In many ways the PD makes me feel inadequate. What ‘they’ say doesn’t come across in reality. I think you have the real world in your classroom. I have my personal interpretation from the PD* (P1, p3).

As has already been shown several participants did not view the *Trial* as optional, but rather as a staged policy development that would inevitably be implemented in every school across the NT. During the initial *REAL* professional development training program organisational and financial support was promised by program organisers, as an incentive for Preschool and Transition teachers to immerse themselves in the *Age of Entry Trial*. Participant 3 articulated her thoughts that only the initial funding required for the successful implementation of the *Age of Entry Trial* in the Transition
class had been provided. Future and ongoing funding, claims Participant 3, had not been made available.

The provision of extra adults has been overlooked and not funded. In Preschool extra adults are provided; extra help is needed but should be there. The $11,000 supposed to tide us over has run out…REAL learning hasn’t supported this; hasn’t supported teachers in what’s traditionally had extra aid (P3, p1).

School principals were advised to allocate ongoing funds for the successful introduction and continuation of the new policy. In many instances, over a period of three years, other financial demands have placed pressure on school principals to allocate their schools’ funds to other projects and areas of the school community. Participant 3 believed DEET (NT) school principals could learn from the innovative approach of the Western Australian Education Department, in its decision to allocate funding for support personnel who assist in early childhood classes for part of each day.

In WA, early childhood classes have assistance for part of the day. In the NT, schools have to organise this (P3, p1).

Participant 3 inferred that, given the limited school-based funds available to school principals and the need to allocate those funds across many school projects, school principals may be reluctant to allocate support staff funding specifically to early childhood classes.

Synonymous with expressed opinions of a lack of financial support from school principals was the view that other teachers within the school were uninformed and unaware of the impact of the Age of Entry Trial. One teacher was very emphatic about the apparent ignorance and relatively unsupportive attitude shown by her colleagues.

I could ask any teacher [at my school]. They wouldn’t have a clue what Age of Entry is. ‘Oh, you’ve got those little kids now.’ They wouldn’t know what that means. That’s all they know about it and yet we tried, in the beginning we’ve tried very much to talk to them (P2, p10).

Not all participants believed that the provision of resources, both human and material, was the sole responsibility of the program organisers. Participants 4 and 6 accepted the challenge of incorporating the policy and new ideas gleaned from REAL to make regular, incremental changes to their Preschool program and environment. Working
collaboratively to implement change, these teachers believe their Preschool to now be highly creative and innovative and worthy of being a good model for others to emulate. It was these teachers’ opinion that, with times of rapid societal change, their programming also needed rapid change. When it became apparent that no further school funds would be available for them to continue programming in similar manner to previous years, Participants 4 and 6 set about recreating their program, timetable and environment with the funding available to them.

Yes, I think so in the way we plan, the structure of our school and how we set things up. Really, in a lot of different areas in our programming, the way, things that we make within the community, the whole set up of our Preschool and the environment. All those things I think we’ve been affected by it and encouraged that, some of the things we were doing were good and we needed to keep going with them and add to that (P6, p4).

We’ve had to change the hours that the children are at Preschool to accommodate …all children to have the same amount of time spent at Preschool and we need to deal with some of the different difficulties of children within the community who come from child care (P6, p5).

This cohesive and creative programming has attracted both positive and negative comments, of which Participant 6 is especially aware.

When we were at the REAL in-service, there were a number of teachers who were very envious of what we have … and what times we had and the planning time we had together and they were very interested in how we achieved it and what arguments we had used in our schools to gain that and so we were able to share that and how we had found it very successful (P6, p6).

Some participants spoke of this Preschool’s creativity in less than glowing terms, speaking of it as being unethical, unfair to parents and colleagues and not in accordance with Australian Education Union policy. These comments were dismissed by Participant 6, who justified her willingness to make those changes and which had led to her Preschool’s current cohesive and creative program.

We needed to make some changes. The different nature of the way children would be entering school and it was important for us to do that planning with parents as well as the school and the child care centres … and we considered many ideas and went with this particular option [in which all children have the same amount of time spent at Preschool]. It seems one that suits most people. For myself professionally, this is a wonderful option … the amount … to have some planning time with all staff together is … it allows for … a lot more cohesive and creative planning (P6, p5).
Early childhood teachers’ varied conceptualisation of what represents organisational support highlighted varying levels of resentment toward DEET (NT) organisation for imposing the *Age of Entry Trial* and its required professional development modules. Evident among several participants was a reluctance to cooperate without the allocation of sufficient support funding.

The minimal level of support from program organisers was not to be confused with the lack of support later felt by Participant 5, when her teaching role was changed from Preschool to Transition class. In her unfamiliar Transition class role, Participant 5 sensed an overwhelming remoteness in her attempts to implement *REAL* content ideas. The inference here is that the *REAL* program was possibly more suited to Preschool than Transition teachers. Without the scaffolding and support of a well-resourced Preschool environment, this teacher, new to the Transition class role was initially overwhelmed by the more formal school setting, the minimal resources in the classroom and the younger age of the child entering school. Participant 5 was, at the time of interview, addressing a major change from teaching in a Preschool environment (where she had been established for many years) to a more formal teaching role in a Transition class. In comparison to addressing this overwhelming workload of a Transition class program, Participant 5 was, therefore, non-committal about her participation in *REAL* and its perceived value to her current teaching position:

*This year in particular I’d say probably I haven’t felt so much related to the *REAL* workshops. I’m moving onto where the children are going from Preschool into school. That’s been really hard (P5, p5).*

5.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter outlines the perspectives of early childhood teachers in relation to the introduction of a single and early *Age of Entry* inclusive policy and its accompanying professional development training program. These perspectives were largely influenced by the organisers’ misrepresentation of the *Age of Entry* policy as a *trial* and the teachers’ unfulfilled anticipation of continued organisational support during and after the policy’s implementation.

In the first section it is evident that the teacher participants are in agreement over the need for a single age of entry into Preschool and Transition classes for all NT children.
and across all Australian states and territories. After decades of no uniformity of age of entry across NT schools, this policy was generally accepted and approved of by the early years’ teachers. Approval was also expressed for components of the policy’s associated professional development training program, REAL, which was offered to all Preschool and Transition teachers in the NT. Appreciation was expressed for most of this program’s content, suggesting the program to have relevant, useful components which would meet the pedagogical needs of the attending teachers.

In the next section of this chapter it is argued that, accompanying a tentative approval of a proposed single Age of Entry into school policy and appropriate professional development training for all teachers who would be implementing this policy, was an apprehension toward the implied earlier starting age of children in Preschool or Transition classes. This apprehension towards the single Age of Entry into school policy arose when it became apparent that the proposed single age represented an earlier (than current practice) age of entry into school.

Considering themselves to be advocates for best early childhood practice, most of the teachers in this study disagreed with the proposed change to an earlier starting age for children. Doubts surfaced over the policy’s satisfactory implementation and continued success, followed by expressions of resentment that a policy was introduced without prior consultation with those who would have to action it.

Further, the early childhood teachers’ varied conceptualisation of what represents organisational support highlighted varying levels of resentment toward the organisation for imposing the Age of Entry Trial and its required professional development modules with only minimal promises of financial support. Evident among several participants was a reluctance to cooperate without the allocation of sufficient support funding.

The findings in Proposition One suggest that there was no uniform acceptance of DEET’s (NT) intended initiative to establish a single Age of Entry policy into all NT schools. Participant responses indicate a lack of appreciation of DEET’s (NT) veiled purpose for teacher participation in REAL, that of introducing a policy which these early childhood teachers rejected in principle. The many differing perspectives
represented in this chapter reflect the findings of Rodd (2006) who claims that autocratic leadership stifles teamwork, fosters resentment and reduces teacher commitment.

This chapter argues that teachers in early childhood settings approve in principle of the single Age of Entry [into school] policy, with its associated REAL professional development training program, but identify feelings of apprehension and resentment towards the inclusive policy of an early Age of Entry [into school] and the lack of organisational support provided to implement the policy. In the next chapter personal and pedagogical constraints on early childhood teachers through increasing social and organisational influences on their classrooms will be outlined.
Chapter 6: Theoretical Proposition Two Statement

6.1 INTRODUCTION

It will be recalled that this study is an investigation of how early childhood teachers managed changes to their teaching practice in the context of their exposure to a specified professional development training program. The three propositions that emerged from the analysis of collected data are:

Theoretical Proposition One Statement

Teachers in early childhood settings approve in principle of a single Age of Entry [into school] policy, with its associated REAL professional development training program, but identify feelings of apprehension and resentment towards the policy being inclusive of an early Age of Entry and toward the lack of organisational support provided to implement this policy.

Theoretical Proposition Two Statement

Teachers in early childhood settings acknowledge that rapid social and generational classroom changes pose personal and pedagogical constraints, which influence their conceptual interpretation of the term best practice, an interpretation that appears to be at odds with REAL professional development program organisers.

Theoretical Proposition Three Statement

Teachers in early childhood settings deem their particular circumstances to influence both their perspectives of future schooling and their level of commitment to being early childhood education pedagogical change agents following their participation in the REAL professional development training program.

The first theoretical proposition, elaborated upon in the previous chapter, indicates that teachers in early childhood settings approve in principle the single age of entry to school policy whilst identifying feelings of apprehension and resentment towards that single age representing an earlier age of admission to school. This first proposition also identified the personal constraints experienced by these teachers as a result of the policy’s imposition, with expectations placed on them by REAL professional development program organisers to facilitate quality learning programs for a younger
This chapter outlines the second proposition statement, namely:

Teachers in early childhood settings acknowledge that rapid social and generational classroom changes pose personal and pedagogical constraints, which influence their conceptual interpretation of the term *best practice*, an interpretation that appears to be at odds with *REAL* professional development program organisers.

The second theoretical proposition, elaborated in this chapter, focuses on the escalation of social and generational changes which pose personal and pedagogical constraints on teachers in early childhood settings who have just completed a professional development program. The introduction of the *Age of Entry* policy increased teacher awareness of and concerns about the influence of society’s changing profile on their personal and pedagogical interpretations of the term *best practice*.

This chapter will address these aspects of teacher awareness and concern, in three parts, related to the changes teachers are experiencing in their classroom, school and community environments, then personal, pedagogical and professional concerns will be articulated. The first section will address the personal constraints being experienced by teachers as a result of these perceived classroom, school and community environmental changes. In the second part of this chapter the pedagogical constraints placed on teachers as a result of the above changes are outlined. The third and concluding part considers the teachers’ professional concerns about early childhood expertise and the term *best practice* and considers the financial and professional support that the teachers view as essential to accompany all early childhood *best practice* programs.

The ideas expressed in this chapter position the participating teachers at odds with DEET (NT) policy designers and *REAL Learning for Early Years* professional development training program organisers. There is a marked incongruence of participants’ personal, pedagogical and professional perspectives with *REAL* professional development training program organisers’ expectations. The first section is outlined below.
6.2 TEACHER PERSONAL CONSTRAINTS

‘Change is constant: growth is optional’ perhaps best describes the current global and local educational scene in the NT of Australia. Several teachers in this study expressed their awareness and concerns over the seeming escalation of changes in children’s family and social circumstances over the past years in this context:

I’d say there’s definitely a changing child. Everything about our lifestyle has changed and what happens to children from birth onwards has changed (P7, p3).

I also think times have been changing so rapidly for kids and our society generally (P5, p2).

Participant 2 stated that her interest in research had reinforced her awareness of a rapidly changing future and suggests that there is a new type of child and energy emerging.

I read a lot on my research in … generational change … future schooling – it’s going to look very different to what we had in the last decade … they’re [the children are]going to have a lot of global issues that they’re going to be concerned with as adults (P2, pp2-3).

Participants 1, 2, 4 and 8 attributed the declining influence of family and minimal parent attention in modern lifestyles as a contributing factor to these societal and generational concerns. Participant 8 describes her concern that today’s children have limited parent time, when both parents go to work or only one parent is represented in the family.

We definitely are dealing with children who are changing. In some instances there’s a lot less parent time. Parent time seems to have changed … There are many, many more children where there are two working parents. Sometimes it’s a single family and the parent is working (P8, p3).

This observation indicates participant concern over the minimal parenting some young children are receiving and the need for compensatory programs to meet the social and emotional needs of the children in early childhood programs.

A related concern was expressed by Participant 1, that parent work obligations prevented parents from offering their highly needed and valued assistance in Preschool and Transition class programs.
Parents are harder to get as most of them go to work (P1, p2).

Regular, reliable parent support is highly desirable in Preschool and Transition class programs and has, in previous years, been depended upon for assisting with the establishment of effective child-family relationships and for the facilitation of individual and group social skills development within those programs. During the REAL professional development program, Relationships and Partnerships was the topic emphasis of the first of four training modules. Relationships and Partnerships was defined as ‘an emotional bond between one or more people’, such as those shared with and between children, their parents and families during REAL. This definition now appears in the mandated early years Strong Beginnings NT curriculum document (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p.74).

Further regret about the lack of engagement between parent and child was expressed by Participant 2, who described the increased freedom that mobile phones now offer young mothers and the resulting inhibition of conversation between adults and children.

Particularly when I hear them with their parents at the end of the session, before the session … they talk, the parents talk but there’s no engagement in many cases. I find that the lower socio-economic mums are frequently on the actual mobile phone when they walk in to the preschool and they don’t do anything more than smile and a hand out when they greet their child (P2, p6).

In her role as teacher-in-charge of an NT Preschool, Participant 2 raised issues of concern over the lack or responsibility demonstrated by parents.

Our parents aren’t responsible enough now, oh no, they make us do all these reminders and we put out so much paper and they still don’t read it and they tell us we haven’t sent them this letter (P2, p19).

It is becoming increasingly apparent that busy, working parents either do not receive the newsletters or messages that are given to their children, or do not read and respond to these messages. This challenges the relationship between early childhood teachers and families, particularly where family connections are only available through other after-school-hours-care settings.
Participant 2 also related to an increasing necessity for early childhood teachers to provide emotional and social stability for children, who often had to make readjustments to their lives, in order to accommodate unfamiliar adults in parent or care-giver roles.

*But the bottom line is that right now we have to be nice ladies ahead of anything else, because ...the children have got so many people in their lives... ...the nice ladies who are going to accept everything about that child and give them the opportunity to explore themselves, because they're not going to get it in these other places with these other people* (P2, p19).

The stability provided by teachers in early childhood settings can be linked to the once-hypothetical future world scenario created by Beare (2001) for five year old Angelica, in one of the REAL professional development program’s prescribed readings:

*I am uneasy about changes in families. I am told there is a 40 per cent change that Mum and Dad will divorce and remarry while I am still at school. I may not grow up with my natural brother or with both my natural parents. I will not know my grandparents very well because our family will move home so often. Many children of my age are growing up in one-parent families.*

(Beare, 2001: p.15)

For Participant 2 this is no longer a future world scenario, but a reality of the present for the children in her care.

Concerns over the larger numbers of children now attending childcare programs were expressed by Participant 4, who inferred that children now spend very minimal time with their own parents as carers.

*I mean ... although I disagree with it ... more and more children are in childcare* (P4, p2).

Participant 4 echoes the concerns of Participant 2, over the varying quality of care and the greater quantity of caregivers for children attending their Preschool or Transition class programs. There are, to date, no nationally agreed or consistent standards within the childcare sector (Elliott, 2006), but there was general agreement amongst the participants of this study that the majority of the children in their programs attended some form of care before or after their attendance at Preschool or school. Several participants in this study would agree with Elliott (2006), that an apparent child-care–education divide of roles, responsibilities and respect exists today. Elliott (2006) maintains:
There must be agreement on professional qualifications for early childhood educators that transcends the care versus education dichotomy and construction of a comprehensive national framework for preparing, credentialing and rewarding [all] early childhood educators (Elliott, 2006: p.44)

The variation and lack of definition in childcare programs makes it more difficult for the early childhood teachers in this study to have collegially shared expectations of the children’s physical, emotional and social experiences when these children first enter Preschool or Transition programs. The child-care-education divide of roles will be addressed further in the second part of this chapter.

Associated with the above perceptions of minimal parent attention, the increased pace of life for adults and its direct relationship to the busy child syndrome that exists today, was identified as another one of several factors to have significant influence on the changes being experienced by teachers and young children alike.

*It’s a lot more difficult to cater for the children that come into the preschool, especially children who are from broken homes or just the busy child syndrome … rushed out of bed and rushed to a child care centre they’re just tired, they’re always tired and so I find we’re catering for a lot more emotional needs of the child (P7, p3).*

Several teachers alluded to the changing, uncontrollable behaviours of children, inferring a need for greater disciplinary measures to be taken by teachers. The Macquarie Dictionary, (3rd edition) defines ‘discipline’ as ‘training to act in accordance with rules’. Many children have spent varying periods of time in childcare settings prior to commencing Preschool or Transition class, experiencing exposure to a variety of rules that may differ significantly to family rules or standards of acceptable behaviour. On entering the classroom, another series of rules are imposed on the young children, creating confusion of consistency and continuity. Participants 2 and 3 each hold the view that discipline, which once was synonymous with training and instruction, now denotes a form of crowd control in the classroom.

*What teachers fear the most, what adults fear the most is this lack of discipline. Now we know that it’s been an issue, we know we have not many deterrents there that turn children’s behaviour around (P2, p11).*

*When you’ve got children on traffic lights [behaviour modification method] and you’re monitoring them every half hour to see if they’re doing the right thing … it’s difficult to do that (P3, p2).*
The increase in very young children’s unsociable behaviours and the need for teachers to implement greater behaviour management strategies at such an early age signified further concerns about appropriate programs for these children as they progressed through their formal schooling years. One teacher expressed her relief that children in Transition classes were still able to be relatively easily controlled by their teachers.

*Changing child: at Transition level [we] still have them in our hands [they are still manageable and able to be controlled]* (P1, p1).

Participant data evidence indicates that another significant and often detrimental factor influencing young children today is the electronic shift in technology that is invading almost every aspect of life and work in both home and school settings. One participant relayed concerns over the excessive use of television and other forms of electronic media in the home.

*A lot of children... at the end of the day just go shopping with mum, go and get a DVD and veg. out in from of the TV (an extra wide super plasma screen). Then they go to bed and get up and that’s their interacting done and they haven’t really learnt anything about how to solve their problems, which is so important* (P3, p3).

The ready availability of television to young children and the plethora of electronic toys owned by many children today were also causes of great concern for these early childhood teachers. An equal and escalating introduction of electronic teaching devices, creating the need for regular professional development training for teachers to improve their technological skills, adds to these teachers’ anxieties about an electronic viewing saturation that they do not consider to be age appropriate at early childhood level.

Two teachers were emphatic that the excessive use of television and other electronic media devices did not advantage children or teachers,

*I don’t think it’s for the better while we have a wide plasma screen ‘thingo’ teaching our children* (P3, p2).

*I also think times have been changing so rapidly for kids and our society generally and the use of technology in particular* (P5, p2).

The constancy and rapidity of change is both celebrated and regretted by these teachers, who hesitate about the need to introduce and teach sophisticated technology skills to very young children.
Participant 2 especially regrets the loss of family histories and stories which, once passed on aurally, have no longer been sought by family members since the introduction and constant viewing of the television set.

*But the television appeared! We knew all that so we had all that background. We had generations in us and then this image thing started and we took away all the history of families and children and ownership of their mind* (P2, p18).

It is possible that several television sets belong to one household, enabling children and parents to simultaneously view different programs. The data reflects concerns that quality family discussions and the acquisition of language skills for young children have moved aside to accommodate attractive children’s channel viewing, allowing busy parents extra time to work twice as hard.

A counter effect of this acknowledged escalation of forms and applications of technology is the young child’s easy grasp and assimilation of information and communication technology skills. Advances in technology were first understood and implemented by adults. Participants expressed the opinion that because change is constant in children’s lives today, these young children are better able to embrace the new age of technology than their parents and teachers. Participants 2 and 5 relate their struggle to remain connected to and to hold some form of control over the sophisticated learning of young children who are now moving into a “new age of high technology” (McCain and Jukes, 2001: p.23).

*I also think times have been changing so rapidly for our kids … and the use of technology in particular. I can’t keep up with it* (P5, p2).

*By the time they get out of their schooling the world will have changed so much … But they won’t be connected to the real world …they’ll be very aware from television and the news and so on that the earth is in a dire state…. But they’re going to take all of that so it’ll be natural to them. They’ll hear it in their world* (P2, p15).

In acknowledging this paradigm shift towards more sophisticated technological learning for children and adults, Participant 2 recognises the need for today’s teachers, especially those who have been teaching for more than twenty years, to maximise opportunities for acquiring any effective teaching skills that technology may offer.

*The use of technology in our schools has to be seen through different eyes. The people that have been using it to date, 30 – 40 year old teachers, use it in*
a way that suited them. They’ve got to start thinking about the learning technology side of it, how to get kids learning and what’s the best way to use the technology to give them [a] the motivation but [b] the opportunities for understandings and learning (P2, p4).

It is evident that Participant 2 has embraced technology-based teaching strategies, both to collect observational data for assessment purposes and to enhance class group project work.

I record children a lot on the video recorder and they see themselves back sort of immediately on the television, but they don’t listen to what they’re saying … they don’t listen … they can’t identify … who’s speaking … It’s because they’ve got so much to focus on. The world is so full of noise and colour and movement that they’ve lost the opportunity to focus (P2, p5).

However, Participant 2 cautions against the ready availability of technology and media sources to adults and children, acknowledging that the ready availability of televisions and mobile telephones must be considered to be responsible for an apparent lack of engagement between parents and children and the generally poorer language skills of children now entering school.

I think this is something which technology and the television is taking away, is that children, when you listen to them talking, they talk the talk but they’re not expecting a response or even an interjection to what they’re talking about (P2, p6).

Regret that children’s imaginative and emotional development has suffered at the expense of technology-rich environments, which cannot offer children imaginative or emotional freedom to explore and play, was expressed by two teachers. Participant 3 alluded to the “virtual reality” world of television that is destroying children’s curiosity and is, at the same time, neglecting to meet one of young children’s greatest needs, that of interaction with nature-rich environments.

We need to provide environments where children can, at their own pace, learn those skills that underpin academic subjects … environments are becoming less and less natural, with less dirt to dig in, less free bark to scratch your back on and be scratched by (P3, p2).

The technology invasion in Preschool and Transition class environments is at odds with the participants’ concepts of the third critical element of REAL, the Active Learning Approach. Active learning approaches, as set out in the Strong Beginnings document, cater for learning experiences in which children “learn effectively through play, collaboration, modelling, communicating and interacting” (Department of
Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p.110). This document strongly promotes children’s interaction with adults, the maximum use of their five senses to learn, their engagement in hands-on activities and their freedom to play with concrete materials in order to develop essential social skills. Several participants believe that the development of children’s social skills is inhibited as the growth of technology use in homes and schools increases and children’s interaction with objects and exploration of their natural environments decreases. The participants believe that these interactive and exploratory experiences are difficult to achieve in a growing climate of technology-based play.

It is clear in this research study that current social and generational changes have greatly impacted on the teachers’ personal values and attitudes in this early childhood sector. All teachers expressed an increased awareness of and stress related to the rapid pace of societal and generational change. Participant 2 demonstrated proactive awareness and acceptance of many of these societal and generational changes. The earlier description of “change [being] constant” is verified by these teachers, as is the suggestion that “growth is optional”. For many teachers in this study the constancy of a seemingly large and rapid force of change and their need to grow with that force of change was problematic and wrought with anxieties.

The next section of this chapter will consider the constraints experienced by teachers in their pedagogy as a result of social and generational changes.

6.3 TEACHER PEDAGOGICAL CONSTRAINTS

The paradigm shift made by young children towards new modes of learning, in their easy grasp and assimilation of technology, combined with these children’s earlier age of entry into Preschool and school programs, requires teachers to address the changes and adapt to them not only on personal levels, but also on pedagogical levels. Pedagogy in the context of this study refers to the science and art of teaching (Oxford Dictionary, 2004). This dictionary describes science as the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and the natural world through observation and experiment. The science referred to in the dictionary definition of pedagogy is here perceived to be teachers’ intellectual and practical activities, encompassing their study of and response to
children’s nurture and development. Thus for the purposes of this discussion the term pedagogy will include all intellectual and practical activities that teachers must address in their daily teaching practice. Strong Beginnings: Supporting Best Practice in the Early Years (Strong Beginnings, 2005) is a pedagogy resource and support document to assist early childhood educators in planning, programming and teaching intellectual and practical activities.

It is significant to note that all participants in this study hold pre-1980 early childhood qualifications. It was established from participant interview data that pre-1980 teacher training courses placed great emphasis on observation of children at play and the establishment of developmentally appropriate programs. Dockett and Fleer (2003) claim that play is related to a child’s stages of development and these stages are generally applied to all children as they move in a predictable pattern into becoming adults.

It is through the systematic study of the behaviour of young children, using methods of observation, that the participants have challenged themselves to continually adapt their programs. Such is the case with Participant 2 as she reflected on her attempted program changes,

This is not working, I’m tearing my hair out, what am I going to do and I can’t get a good idea (P2, p7).

Reflecting on a slightly-less-than-chaotic Preschool session, in which a program change had been attempted to accommodate a younger age group of children, Participant 2, once again, had to revise her program content.

I must admit, I was pretty like, ‘whoa, what have I done, what’s this all about? What have I done?’ (P2, p8)

Participant 2, with many years’ experience and knowledge of child developmental theory had built her own series of expectations about what she believed was age appropriate for four and five year old children. The admission of three and a half year old children into her well established Preschool program created unprecedented challenges to Participant 2’s conventional theories of child development and the suitability of her environment and program for these younger aged children.
One of the four factors promoted during the REAL professional development program was the critical element of *Environments*, which includes “safe, secure and stimulating quality environments [to] support developmentally appropriate, educationally sound and flexible approaches” (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p.111). Participant 4 believes that young children’s physical environments have a powerful influence on their learning and should facilitate their active exploration and discovery of nature’s resources, in preference to an environment in which there is passive subjection to the increasingly predominant plasma screens of classroom television sets and computers.

Another participant recognised a critical need to address young children’s emotional development and that this need was taking precedence over other learning aspects of her program. Her concern arose from awareness that many children in her class were being rushed from one presumed beneficial activity to another, either before or after their attendance at Preschool.

*It’s a lot more difficult to cater for the children that come into the preschool, especially children who are from broken homes or just the busy child syndrome ... rushed out of bed and rushed to a child care centre they’re just so tired, they’re always tired and so I find we’re catering for a lot more emotional needs of the child (P7, p3).*

Participant 7 described the difficulties associated with catering for the changed lifestyles of children coming into her Preschool program. In acknowledging the challenges this created in programming, in order to adequately meet the changing needs of young children, Participant 7 expressed the difficulties she was experiencing in this planning and programming.

*Everything about our lifestyles has changed and what happens to children from birth onwards has changed. It’s a lot more difficult to cater for children that come into the preschool (P7, p3).*

Echoing Participant 7’s need to address children’s emotional development, Participant 4 regretted that childcare programs were now, for increasing numbers of children, the child’s first formalised social program outside of the home environment. Participant 4 considered childcare programs to place unprecedented demands on the Preschool teacher.
More and more children are in childcare … It’s not a healthy environment. The onus is then put upon the preschool and I feel a good preschool has to deal with that (P4, p2).

Several participants alluded to their belief that childcare centres represent varied and limited levels of care and teaching to that of the home, where mothers are the child’s prime carer and teacher. A decrease in time spent on one-to-one independent skills guidance and constant adherence to schedules and time limits in a childcare situation appear to leave these children with a greater dependence on adults to assist them in simple everyday tasks, rather than give them an independence to perform these tasks unaided. Participant 2 explained how some simple, enjoyable, shared learning experiences, once a part of a young child’s life, now seemed elusive.

That happens as a consequence of their child-care experience and the fast life, so mums, in the beginning, when they’re two and a half or three; she’s washing their hands for them. “C’mon, time to wash your hands”. She’s lathering the soap, there’s not enough time to leave the soap with the child, choose the right size soap, let them waste a whole pack of soap while they lather their hands and the mirror and all that experience probably is not as prevalent for every child. You couldn’t say that every child has experienced that but I would think that years ago you could say that every child has had the soap (P2, pp8-9).

For one teacher, the skill of being able to travel with children at their childhood pace, instead of at today’s rushed adult speeds, was a significant requirement to satisfy her perception of sound early childhood pedagogy. Looking at the world through a child’s eyes and thereby enhancing pedagogy based on sound early childhood principles, was a matter of choice. Participant 2 did not believe that every early childhood teacher was at liberty to make that choice.

Looking at the world through children’s eyes, that’s something that I thought everybody could do, but I now realise that that’s not something people are even interested in doing. But if you can look even into your classroom, as you walk through a door and see it through the child’s eyes you’ll see a whole different environment to what you see as an adult (P2, p17).

Fears were expressed by several participants that DEET’s (NT) demands for increased focus on traditional literacy and numeracy activities were impinging on what these teachers perceived to be the young child’s real work, that is, learning through investigations that developed from children’s play. These teachers firmly believed that play-based learning was critical, especially now that even younger children were entering their Preschool and Transition class programs.
Several expressions of disagreement over the early introduction of literacy and numeracy activities were voiced by the teachers in this study.

We’re so tied up with literacy and numeracy expectations and not understanding that we can get greater results from doing things that aren’t traditionally literacy activities or numeracy activities (P2, p13).

One teacher revealed her struggle with introducing formal learning in a time frame which she considered too early for the children in her class and remained determined to maintain a play-based program.

I still struggle with the academic pressure, to teach English and Maths formally (P1, p3).

I have an activity based program. I do activities all the time and I’ve included lots more play time (P1, p2).

There need not be opposing curriculum views, as suggested by Participants 1 and 2, with programs having either a formal or play-based learning approach. Participant 1 had, over several years, formulated a compromise of literacy and numeracy experiential learning, facilitated through play-based learning activities. Participant 1 informally told of having to ‘fit play in’, as the afternoon programs for her Transition class were controlled by non-negotiable, time-tabled lessons, including Science, Library and Religious Instruction lessons. She readily acknowledged that spontaneous play activities in her class were severely limited by a harsh, space restricted environment, large class numbers and an overcrowded time-table. As a consequence, the children’s creative, constructive and social play had suffered and deteriorated.

Participant 1’s belief that greater consideration must be given to the children themselves in their programs through the facilitation of opportunities to practise play, affirms Participant 2’s views.

We’re looking at the children themselves and starting to give them what they really need (P2, p1).

That’s what we should be able to do through our planning ... creating play opportunities for them. The active learning aspect of it ... the play is something that fewer people are understanding or understand the real value of (P2, p2).
For Participant 2, play-based programs, not formal literacy and numeracy activities, give children the opportunity to become independent thinkers and learners,

_Well, the thing that happens, this is what I’m quite clear about now, is that when you give children the opportunity to be independent thinkers and independent learners and be creative and have imagination, you cannot give them a structure that’s so tight that they can’t move in, because you can’t have both_ (P2, p11).

Play is generally related to a child’s stages of development, which Participant 2 believes must be recognised and considered to be of the utmost importance in all early childhood settings. Participant 2 did not favour formal activities for children who, at ages three and a half to five years, were not developmentally ready to be so restricted and limited in their time to play.

Participant 5 observed vast differences in the environment, resources and program requirements between the Preschool and Transition class. After many years as the teacher-in-charge of a Preschool, Participant 5 was totally unprepared for the increased and unfamiliar workload of teaching in a Transition class. Her recent and coerced move from a play-based learning Preschool program to the more formal setting of a Transition class program created anxiety and frustration.

_This year in particular I’d say probably I haven’t felt so much related to the REAL workshop activities. I’m moving onto where the children are moving from Preschool into school. That’s been really hard_ (P5, p5).

Added to the perceived stress of introducing formal literacy and numeracy activities into their programs, the early childhood teachers in this study acknowledged another form of stress, that of facing the task single-handed. Hopeful of receiving extra classroom support and regular classroom assistance, through funds supplied by the organisers of the _Age of Entry Trial_ and _REAL_, these teachers voiced disappointment that this assistance was only minimally provided or non-existent. Participant 3 expressed it in this manner:

_It’s difficult to do that … 24 children are looking after themselves while you’re counselling one (or five, which I had this year – 2006)_ (P3, p2).

_At that age, if we don’t have an extra adult, it’s impossible_ (P3, p2).

One teacher envisioned being able to do so much more in her program if extra funding was offered and assistance forthcoming.
Lots more assistance needed; could do lots more if we had more assistance (P1, p1).

Some participants expressed another concern, believing they were insufficiently trained to deal with the increasing demands of the changing lifestyles of the younger children now entering Preschool. Participant 7 expressed some comfort in the thought that she at least held early childhood qualifications, but hinted at the greater difficulties teachers with no prior early childhood training would experience if they were asked to teach in current early childhood settings,

We hear of schools where … we have upper primary teachers going into preschool and I can tell you it’s disastrous. They just have no idea … they just cannot get down to the level that’s needed for a three and a half year old (P7, p7).

With the best intentions of accepting the challenges of pedagogy change, several teachers explained their dilemma in attempting to introduce concepts and ideas from their professional training program.

In many ways the [professional development] makes me feel inadequate. What ‘they’ say doesn’t come across in reality (P1, p3).

In teaching there are no finite answers, there’s no ‘one size fits all’ for anybody, so we constantly have to adapt and change our practice to better service the needs of our community (P9, p4).

Recent DEET (NT) program changes to include children with special learning needs into mainstream classrooms has caused further concerns for teachers, especially for those teachers who do not have prior special needs education training. Special needs children previously received individual or small group support in specialised educational settings, with a generous adult to child ratio. This support is no longer available and the responsibility for the inclusion of these children into mainstream education settings had been passed on to individual school managers.

Having to deal with children with special needs in the mainstream has also created huge demands on our time and knowledge base and resources and the need to gain extra knowledge to deal with the different types of problem (P7, p4).

There appears to be a great deal of incongruence between the perspectives of the teachers of this study and those of the DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers with regard to pedagogy expectations and performance. Considering
themselves to have always been professional in their practice and thereby wishing to be recognised as experts in early childhood best practice, these teachers have not readily accepted the imposition of a policy which posed many pedagogical constraints on them and created an urgent need for immediate and continuing pedagogy changes.

In the following section of this chapter, the teachers’ conceptual interpretations of the term professional best practice will be outlined. It is significant to do so at this point because there appeared to be a disagreement over the meaning of best practice between the early childhood teachers and the REAL professional development program organisers. A general consensus of teachers’ conceptual interpretations of the term best practice was a value-laden, activity and play-based program in which children were happily engaged and given opportunities to both succeed and fail. In such programs a child’s age-appropriate reality and the learning of life skills should be evident in significant and equal parts.

6.4 TEACHER CONCEPTUAL INTERPRETATION OF PROFESSIONAL BEST PRACTICE

The personal and pedagogical constraints experienced by the participants of this study, as outlined above, created feelings of uneasiness between the participants’ perspectives and those of the DEET (NT) organisation, as reflected in the REAL professional development program. Most of the teachers interviewed had twenty or more years of early childhood teaching experience and therefore believed themselves, and not DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers to have practical, relevant and current early childhood best practice teaching expertise. These teachers disagreed in principle with the proposed earlier age of entry into Preschool and Transition programs for children, believing it to be inappropriate and problematic to introduce children who were already rushing through childhood into more formal learning programs at an accelerated pace, from the age of three and a half years of age.

The teachers expressed concerns related to the programming and planning outcomes and assessment requirements contained in the newly mandated Strong Beginnings: an explicit guide to Quality Practice in the Early Years (2007) and did not regard as either appropriate or desirable the following statement:
A mandated requirement in NT schools is the two hours per day of English oracy, literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: Section 5, Ch.17).

The participants believed they adequately promoted oracy, literacy and numeracy skills holistically within their programs and were not impressed at being commanded to do so in an incremental way.

From the data collected there is ample evidence to suggest the teachers were in agreement that:

- a child’s earlier age of entry into a curriculum-based and assessment-linked program is detrimental to the child’s creative and imaginative development
- increased limitations in facilities, resources and adult-child ratio exist as a child moves from a Preschool to Transition class environment
- teachers face the seemingly impossible task of adequately catering for today’s ‘busy’ child
- teachers cannot escape the constant pressure to address and re-address the fast pace of change in their programs.

Participant 2 believed that best practice should include:

Looking at the children themselves and starting to give them what they [developmentally] really need (P2, p1).

This best practice, Participant 2 explained, must focus on:

What play really is. It’s not just messing about, their own time. It’s how to develop that and not interrupt it. I think that’s the thing that adults do most of all… interrupt play…. I’m always thinking of best possible practice, what’s currently the need for students in our Preschools (P2, p2).

For some teachers, engagement with the children in their care, through an understanding of what was happening in these children’s lives, was an essential component of best early childhood practice.

The work they produce, the kids are engaged and the kids are happy (P4, p3). If we’re thinking teachers and we’re engaged with our students and engaged with the work that we’re doing then we must be making changes constantly … so we constantly have to adapt and change our practice to better service the needs of our community (P9, p4).
Happy, laughing children, free to experiment with their own ideas represented best practice for Participant 7, who wished to be free from constraints posed by those not immediately involved in her program.

_Our children enjoy coming to Preschool. They're happy, there's lots of laughter. Our children ... I think we provide our children with lots of opportunity for trial and error and experimenting with their own ideas._

(P7, p6)

A dilemma exists for the teachers in this study who believe they are specialist early childhood teaching practitioners and who have, throughout their careers, systematically undertaken professional development training to assist them in embracing change and ensuring best practice in their programs. Although these teachers’ concepts of best practice do not differ significantly from those of REAL professional development program organisers, there does appear to be a misunderstanding of who should be the decision makers. The elemental difference lies between the teachers’ conceptual interpretation of best practice, which they believed and acknowledged was ably supported during REAL and their unsuccessful attempts to implement such best practice for the younger aged group of children now attending their programs. Minimal resource provision and an absence of continued support by the program organisers are nominated as reasons for this lack of success.

For these teachers it is unacceptable to be required to undertake specific professional development training with a view to adapting their programs to an even younger age group, especially if adequate organisational support is not offered. While acknowledging the need to review the community’s long-held opinion of early childhood teachers as merely ‘nice ladies’, together with the associated warm, fuzzy image of early childhood education, the teachers maintained the right to create the image of best practice they believed appropriate, an image that would appear less restrictive in its approach than what they believed DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers to be establishing.

Participant 2 recognised the need to firstly consider the children’s ability to work harmoniously and cooperatively and made a deliberate decision about her current teaching image. She therefore decided to prioritise the children’s emotional and social needs, giving these needs her greater programming attention.
But the bottom line is that right now we have to be nice ladies ahead of anything else, because, just as you say, the children have got so many people in their lives, in the Preschool and the Transition class and the Year One class they have to be nice people, the nice ladies who are going to accept everything about that child and give them the opportunity to explore themselves, because they’re not going to get it in these other places with these other people.

(P2, p19)

The participants in this study claimed the right to use their own professional judgements in making pedagogy change decisions. They responded positively to the content and the critical elements of Relationships, Environments, Active learning and Language as outlined in the REAL professional development program, but were not appreciative of the imposed policy and program changes which they perceived to undermine their professionalism. Participant 9 expressed the consensus of the participants, who all believe themselves to be well-trained to address concepts of change and who were generally satisfied that their interpretations of best practice were those that best met the immediate and future needs of the children in their programs.

Yes well I have to say that they’re concepts that we constantly think about here and we constantly try to build or find better ways anyway, without having to have a seminar to discuss them (P9, p1).

6.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has addressed the personal, professional and pedagogical constraints experienced by teachers in the light of current rapid social and generational changes in young children’s lifestyles. Overwhelming as some of these changes may have appeared to the teachers in this study, there is much to indicate that the teachers were more overwhelmed by the DEET (NT) decision to introduce a policy to bring even younger aged children (than the established and accepted age of past programs) into their Preschool and Transition class programs. It is evident that these teachers have not responded favourably to the imposed changes. Interpretations of best practice have therefore been questioned, together with whose domain early childhood expertise really lies in.

Some of the blame for the lack of ongoing support for early childhood teachers in each school must be passed to school principals, who were given the ultimate
responsibility for allocating funds for these programs within their schools. Participant 3 explained the program’s financial details in the following manner:

_The provision of extra adults has been overlooked and not funded ... The $11,000 supposed to tide us over has run out. On the last day of school (2006) funding was not guaranteed for Transition in 2007.... If people really supported early years education, they’d put their money where their mouth is_ (P3, p1).

The participants unanimously agreed that, for the first year of the *Age of Entry Trial* program, the allocated monies facilitated a relatively smooth introduction and operation of the program. Most of the participating schools chose to allocate the funding to employ extra staff and deploy them to the Transition class. However, at the end of the first year of the policy’s introduction, the early childhood teachers realised that, once the initial allocation of monies had been spent, it was the responsibility of each school’s management team to decide on the feasibility of further financial support for the Preschool and Transition class programs involved. Early childhood needs therefore were listed as several among many school needs and were prioritised or ignored in accordance with the school’s overall action plan funding needs.

This chapter argues that early childhood teachers have experienced significant personal, professional and pedagogical constraints since the introduction of the *Age of Entry Trial* and its associated professional development training program, REAL. It claims that early childhood teachers, already addressing an escalation of social and generational changes which include rapidly changing home and family situations and an unprecedented electronic shift in home and school settings, must now readjust their programs and learning environments to accommodate an even younger age group of children than in previous years.

The effects of the technological shift and the upsurge of program data input requirements have created further constraints on teachers who hold pre-1980 early childhood qualifications and therefore struggle to gain and maintain the necessary level of technology skills to meet current curriculum planning and assessment demands. For several participants it seemed as though no sooner was one technological skill learned and mastered than a new one was demanding to be learnt. In general conversation prior to interview, one participant admitted, “to mark time
with my computer skills is actually to slide backwards”. For these teachers, the rapid learning of many new skills, when previously their knowledge and skills development had been sufficient to ensure well established programs and successful career paths, added undue pressure and concern.

This chapter also investigates teacher perspectives on the academic pressures placed on very young children, in society’s swing from play-based programs to the more formal literacy and numeracy activities now deemed to be basic early childhood curriculum requirements. Although there is no conclusive evidence to support claims that a play-based program provides a better quality program than those focussed specifically on literacy and numeracy skills development, the teachers in this study believe that well organised play in their programs is better positioned to facilitate children’s enjoyment in later exposure to literacy and numeracy activities. They firmly believed play-based programs to be physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually appropriate for very young children.

Questioning of the teachers’ conceptual professional interpretations of the term best practice has been discussed in this chapter, as these interpretations appear to vary from the definition and attention given to them by DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers. Teacher constraints have been shown to be personally, professionally and pedagogically significant throughout this chapter, fuelled by feelings of a lack of financial and personal support from organisers of the REAL professional development program.

In the NT teachers are invited to select professional development training programs which they believe are designed to supplement their existing teacher training and to promote greater confidence in their professional practice. The educational national and international landscape is changing significantly. In the UK a recent plan for national priorities for teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD) recommends that:

CPD [continued professional development] must not only meet the immediate needs of teachers, but also support them in preparing for longer term change (Training Development Agency for Schools, 2006).
The futures-related concerns expressed by the teachers in this study were not diminished during their participation in REAL. Participant 1, during informal discussion, had expressed a hope that some of her personal, professional and pedagogical needs would be addressed through similar concerns expressed in Beare’s (2001) portrayal of Angelica, child of the future. It was therefore disappointing for Participant 1 that the 2001 writing of Beare was not specifically referred to during REAL and that any reference to the future related to a change of policy designed to meet the requirements of a 2010 Federal Government single intake into school mandate. It is contended in this study that REAL did not meet participant expectations of addressing future challenges and change, but instead revealed a future that represented the introduction of a less than satisfactory age of entry policy and subsequent problematic professional practice.

The following chapter will address early childhood teachers’ perspectives of the future of schooling and the changes that future schooling requires, together with the teachers’ personal levels of commitment to change pedagogy, following their participation in REAL.
Chapter 7: Theoretical Proposition Three Statement

7.1 INTRODUCTION
The previous two chapters, outlining Propositions One and Two, have elaborated on the introduction of a single Age of Entry into Preschool and school policy. These two chapters have focussed on the personal, professional and pedagogical influences for the Age of Entry policy on those teachers immediately affected by its implementation.

This chapter will discuss early childhood teachers’ perspectives of the future of schooling, the changes that future schooling requires for these teachers and their personal levels of commitment to change pedagogy following their participation in the professional development program, REAL.

Theoretical Proposition Three Statement
Teachers in early childhood settings deem their particular circumstances to influence both their perspectives of future schooling and their level of commitment to being early childhood education pedagogical change agents following their participation in the REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers professional development training program.

This chapter will also examine the impact of the professional development training program, REAL, on the participants’ ongoing teaching practice. DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers presented this training program as an informed, relevant and complementary program to the Age of Entry Trial policy introduction. Before analysing Proposition Three, the context of professional development in the NT needs to be more fully examined.

7.2 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY
For teachers in the NT it is generally understood that professional development supports their immediate professional needs and assists them in preparing for immediate and longer term change in pedagogy. Professional development in the NT has, over past decades, been made available to all teachers who wish to improve
student outcomes for the respective curriculum area of that program. It is regarded by NT school principals and DEET (NT) personnel as a valuable method of consolidating and enhancing teachers’ personal knowledge, skills and understandings and a useful tool in guiding their professional career structures. Throughout each school calendar year, teachers have been free to make personal choices about which professional development programs they believe to be of greatest benefit to their own education program. Professional development programs have generally been conducted during term teaching time. This factor has continued to present concerns for school principals as the cost of providing Emergency Relief Teachers (ERTs) to replace the classroom teachers attending professional development programs often proves financially unviable. Some school managers have been prompted to restrict the number of professional development sessions offered or allocated to each teacher, in an effort to reduce the escalating cost of replacing teachers during term teaching time. In other states of Australia professional development no longer occurs during school term time.

REAL was presented as a package of four parallel modules, conducted over separate and distinct three-day sessions. One of these sessions was held during the first term of the school year and the remaining session was conducted in the second or third term of that year. For some participants, the length of time between module presentations (sometimes a two-term or twenty week time difference) signalled a diminished impact on the learning from the separate modules of the training program.

Attendance at REAL was not optional. REAL was the associated professional development program for the Strong Beginnings: Supporting Best Practice in the Early Years and its purpose was “to connect all early years educators and carers in NT contexts with shared philosophy, principles and practices of evidence-based programs and approaches” (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2005: p.3). Therefore all teachers in NT Preschool and Transition classroom settings were required to attend REAL at some stage of the three-year Age of Entry Trial period.

DEET (NT) professional development program organisers for REAL believe that, in a constantly and significantly changing educational landscape, professional development needs to be informed by a strong research line to meet teacher, school
and student needs. The organisers of REAL provided the Preschool and Transition class teachers with a printed copy of Beare’s (2001) reading, *Creating the Future school: Student outcomes and educational reform. Chapter 2: From an old world – view to a new*, prior to their attendance at the professional development program. It was assumed by at least two participants that the reading would be discussed during the professional development program. O’Brien (2007) alludes to a need for teachers to recognise a sustained professional responsibility to be engaged in effective and relevant training programs, which take into account the needs and priorities of their school as well as their personal career aspirations.

Several participants in this study, whilst acknowledging their responsibilities to engage in relevant and effective professional development programs to meet school, community and personal requirements, were not convinced that there would necessarily be an immediate or automatic transfer of experiential knowledge gained from the REAL professional development program to their current teaching situations.

Another sense of incongruence emerged between the training presented during REAL and the professional practice of the participants. The perspectives expressed by the teachers of this study relate specifically to concerns that they remained inadequately prepared to satisfactorily address the following issues:

- an ability to adequately program for the future schooling needs of children who live with a substantially different patterns of thinking to their own
- an ability to make the necessary changes in practice and beliefs, in their own process of adaptation to preparing children for a changed patterns of thinking.

7.3 TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF SCHOOLING

Early childhood teachers’ conceptualisations of the future reflect certain professional, pedagogical and personal elements. When conceptualising a paradigm shift into future school thinking, participants differed only slightly in their respective views. Most agreed that the present was rapidly changing and that substantially all of the future directions in young children’s education must be considered and addressed immediately. From interview data it is contended that all participants believed that REAL professional development training program provided a vehicle for collegial
discussion of mutual concerns over future directions for early childhood education and that the program presented aspects of sound early childhood practice.

Participants in this study expressed the following concepts of awareness that they believed to be a direct result of their attendance at REAL:

- re-definition
- re-direction
- reinforcement
- reinvigoration
- re-evaluation

These concepts will be elaborated individually in the following section of this chapter.

### 7.3.1 Re-definition

Participant 2 began to address future schooling issues several years ago, in her previous role as project officer for DEET (NT). Continued interest in early childhood research enabled participant 2 to understand and address futures issues more readily than some of the other participants. Recognising her own and her colleagues’ practical experience in early childhood education, Participant 2 believed it was time for all early childhood teachers to re-define their perspectives of what early childhood programs should be and how they should change to accommodate a new future,

*We’ve got to sort of define what we have to offer in our school and how we’re going to grow that and take it forward* (P2, p19).

*I read a lot on my research in … generational change … future schooling. It’s going to look very different to what we had in the last decade* (P2, p2, 3).

These thoughts about re-definition in early childhood programs were affirmed by Participant 4, who recognised an urgent need to review the present and do as much as possible to accommodate a constantly changing future.

*It’s been coming for a long time. I think there’s a lot wrong with what’s going on. There’s also a lot right. What’s not working and what is. I think we should do as much as possible* (P4, p2).

### 7.3.2 Re-direction

Teachers attending REAL developed a greater awareness of the correlation between future schooling perspectives and global perspectives, which would require children
to have a broader range of skills than those needed to be successful in their immediate school environment. These teachers realised the need for children to develop a world-mindedness and an approach to life that reaches far beyond their immediate environment. Participants 5 and 9 implied these skills in the following manner,

*I think we really need to be looking at the child as being part of the whole world, how we teach them and who we’re teaching* (P5, p3).

*I think there is a general, in general a much stronger focus on helping children think about the skills they will need during life, a much broader range of skills than just learning to read and write* (P9, p3).

One teacher revealed her concern at the impact of future schooling issues and the immense programming changes it entailed for her Preschool setting,

*What values would underpin what things we needed to teach children to be able to be successful … really having to think through some of these things and all those things. I think one of things that struck me was with change, was that things had changed and the ways of programming* (P6, p3).

Teachers willingly acknowledged both implicit and explicit evidence of future schooling issues in their environments as a result of attending REAL. However, noticeable variances arose among participants in relation to the influences of this evidence on their personal involvement in addressing the future of schooling. Participants 1, 2, 7 and 8 displayed an enthusiasm to grasp and embrace future concepts in their programs, sharing changes they had made prior to and after their attendance at REAL. Participant 1 expressed that this had always been her philosophy of good teaching.

*That’s what teaching is all about, to prepare children for their futures* (P1, p1).

As a result of continued professional reading and research, Participant 2 showed an awareness of the global issues children should be concerned with, agreeing that future schooling is going to look very different to that of the past,

*I read a lot on my research in … generational change … future schooling – it’s going to look very different to what we had in the last decade and I can see that if we do the right things by these children, they’re going to have … a lot of global issues that they’re going to be concerned with as adults. In order to deal with that we’ve got to… give them a really strong beginning* (P2, p2).

Several participants referred to a future for today’s young child that would be very different to that of their own school years and projected futures. Local and global
social and economic issues and the unsuitability of some current education programs
to adequately equip young children for their futures were included in the perspectives
of these early childhood teachers.

Not only must contemporary teachers be equipped to address future directions in their
programs, but pre-service teachers (students who are currently undertaking teacher
training courses) will also need to be consistent in moving to and staying at the
forefront of change. Participant 2’s experience in teacher education training at both
tertiary and adult levels of early childhood education prompted her to discuss the
current and future training needs for pre-service teachers.

… By the time they get out of their schooling the world will have changed so
much (P2, p14).

…by the time they get to do their middle years and secondary education to go
on to the universities, the universities will have changed. They’ve already
changed (P2, p15).

Participant 7 reflected on the opportunity given to the teachers attending REAL for
designing a perfect Preschool for the future, which would embrace future Preschool
environmental and pedagogical issues and needs.

The only thing I do remember was being asked to design the perfect
Preschool, which we enjoyed and we though lent itself to the future and
dealing with the younger children who are now coming to Preschool (P7, p2).

7.3.3 Reinforcement
The participants in this study, all experienced early childhood educators, were
encouraged and refreshed through their attendance at REAL, believing the program to
positively reinforce changes they had, at some stage in the past, implemented in their
own teaching environments. Participant 1 firmly believed that, after many years of
consistent work to accomplish her definition of early childhood best practice, she was
well prepared to address and adapt to the future schooling issues and needs of the
children in her care.

We realised that when people speak in glossy terms they are actually just
talking about what we are doing anyway (P1, 3).
This was echoed by Participants 7 and 8, who recognised that many of the program components promoted as *best practice* in the *REAL* professional training program were comparable to their own interpretation of *best practice*.

*But I'd also like to say that it [REAL] encapsulates... everything that we considered important and that we thought that we were doing anyway* (P7, p1).

*I felt that there was lots of valuable information provided, that it wasn’t new but it did reinforce what I was already doing* (P8, p1).

### 7.3.4 Reinvigoration

Participant 2, continually invigorated by her own research and program re-evaluation, remained consistently innovative and proactive in her programming.

*I’m always thinking of best possible practice, what’s currently the need for students in our preschools. I read a lot on my research in ... generational change ... future schooling* (P2, p2).

However, Participant 9 was not convinced that she was, or needed to be reinvigorated by compulsory attendance at a professional development training program. Revealing a confidence in her own ability to make appropriate program changes if and as necessary, Participant 9 disagreed with the need for compulsory attendance at *REAL* and with the organisers’ assumption that attending teachers should, after their attendance, become agents of change in their own teaching environments. Participant 9’s statement, relaying her opinion that experienced early childhood educators were already skilled in the concepts and components of the *REAL* program, implies that there was nothing new for her in the program she was required to attend.

*Yes well, I have to say that they’re concepts that we constantly think about here and we constantly try to build or find better ways anyway, without having to have a seminar to discuss them* (P9, p1).

### 7.3.5 Re-evaluation

The need for an evaluation of the suitability and appropriateness of current curriculum content appeared to be a common thread of thought among participants of *REAL*. Participant 5 believed that schools would do well to focus on children’s long-term achievement as well as the generally accepted short-term outcomes of play based early childhood programs. For Participant 5 current programs should include preparation for children’s future career and job opportunities.
I also think that the future issues are probably becoming more aligned to children having … moving towards careers and to work, in terms of the economy (P5, p3).

Some teachers claimed that the effects of future schooling issues were not exclusive to the immediate school environment, but reached out beyond its walls into the child’s community.

In the way we plan, the structure of our school and how we set things up. Really, in a lot of different areas in our programming, the way, things that we make within the community, the whole set up of our preschool and the environment. All those things I think we’ve been affected by it (P6, p4).

We have to get the community to understand that there’s enormous change coming in schools and that it’s started (P2, p20).

Whilst REAL provided appropriate content for the immediate future of professional practice in early childhood programs, it does not appear to have adequately addressed issues of the future as expressed by Participants 2 and 6, nor those of Beare’s (2001) “child of the [very fast approaching] future”, Angelica.

REAL provided an opportunity for participants to re-evaluate their personal, professional and pedagogical perspectives. It is claimed that for many participants of REAL there was a correlation between their particular and personal circumstances and their professional perspectives of future schooling.

These perspectives included:

- Constancy of busy daily teaching schedules as expressed by Participant 1, who returned from REAL overwhelmed by a sense of not having enough time or energy to implement new learning:

  When you come back timelines and other influences do take over and you go back to your old way (P1, p3).

- Personal recognition of skills and energy deficiencies as revealed by Participants 4 and 5, who acknowledged their own limitations in what they believed to be an onerous task:

  I’d be floundering and I’d be a lot more panic-stricken because it seems overwhelming (P4, p4).

  I also think times have been changing so rapidly … I can’t keep up with it (P5, p2).
- Concern that the entry of younger children into the school system would not be matched with a corresponding increase of resources in the classroom. Participant 1 (together with her Transition class colleague) and Participant 9 expressed their concern:

A. and I both agree that having this assistance in the classroom is the crux of whether this early age of entry succeeds or fails. Why at 4.5 (years of age) in Preschool do they need extra assistance but at the same age in Transition they don’t? This is becoming an issue for teachers as to whether or not they want to teach Transition anymore (P1, p1).

I think as a practising classroom teacher we’re always trying to find the best practice that we can and the best tools to equip our children with, but that’s also contingent upon their developmental stages and the resources within the school and the resources the school is prepared to put into the program (P9, p2).

- Concern that the entry of younger children into the school system caused frustration for teachers, who were faced with a constant need to re-address programming and equipment changes. Participant 8 believed this to be beyond the quota of challenges any experienced early childhood teacher should be required to address:

We looked at their level of development and we changed sometimes the simplest routines that we thought were simple were actually too complicated so we changed routines in order to cater for the younger age group. We changed activities; we had to buy new resources … We physically had to change some equipment … the taps in the bathroom were too difficult for some of the younger children so there’ve been ongoing changes … it’s not always the same changes that are needed. We’ve had to make small but significant changes so that the children don’t end up frustrated (P8, p4).

- Concern related to apparent further academic pressure being placed on teachers of very young children through another DEET (NT) review, the Teacher Professional Standards Project Review (Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory, 2006). The introduction of this review into all NT schools was seen by Participant 1 as an equally unnecessary and premature pressure for Preschool and Transition class levels to introduce formal literacy and numeracy skills teaching. This issue had also been a concern for Participant 1 in several of the literacy and numeracy activities promoted as best practice during the REAL professional development training program.
Participant 1 revealed her concern over the review’s apparent bias toward the assessment of young children’s academic skills rather than their creativity, in both Preschool and school programs.

*I still struggle with the academic pressure, to teach English and Maths formally* (P1, p3).

The most important thing I learned was about the pressure we put on children even at this age. It’s too soon … we start pushing for this and that. (P1, p1)

The bias toward regular assessment of academic skills rather than on children’s social development through play was expressed by several teachers in this study. Participant 2 alluded to the constant interruptions to children’s play programs by those who did not appear to fully comprehend or appreciate the value of play for young children,

*I think that that’s the thing adults do most of all – interrupt play.* (P2, p2).

Participant 3 expressed concern that at Transition class level, when children are four and a half or five years of age, play-based programs are necessary for children’s physical, social, emotional and intellectual development. It is her belief that developmental delays in children are the result of these children’s premature introduction to formal curriculum activities.

*I found that they needed the opportunity to play with their peers as more important [than academic learning]. I would have done as I have in previous years … we would have done all those curriculum subjects. Your program would have to take a different shape. A lot of children would have learnt it. But while a lot of children could have managed and learnt it, others would be sitting back, rolling their eyes and looking at the person next to them* (P3, p3).

Participant 6, having anticipated that *REAL* professional development training would resolve many of her concerns about the earlier age of children’s entry into Preschool and school, expressed disillusionment, accompanied by a sense of defeat in the way Preschool programs were now going:

*I had become quite disillusioned with some of the way, the way I saw Preschool was going* (P6, p1).

- Negative attitudes about childcare centres were displayed by some of the teachers in this study. These attitudes related to the number of hours that children spent in childcare programs before and after the prescribed Preschool and school hours. This appeared to create further problems, especially for
Preschool teachers, who believed that children spending long hours in both childcare and school programs were developing a new form of independence, without developing a set of accompanying and appropriate skills.

Unacceptable numbers of very young children playing and working together in one confined childcare space and long hours spent by these children in both care and education programs were cited as problematic for the teachers. These teachers also showed concern over the growing numbers of children coming from childcare centres and not home environments, into their daily programs. Participants 2 and 4 expressed these problems in the following manner:

*So it’s this new independence … That happens as a consequence of their childcare experience and the fast life* (P2, p8).

*I think it starts right back with childcare. I mean, the honest truth, although I disagree with it, is that more and more children are in childcare. A lot of the childcare centres … I don’t see as even close to … it’s not a healthy environment. The onus is then put upon Preschool and I feel a good Preschool has to deal with that. I think we need to go back and look at childcare* (P4, p2).

Participant 6 expressed her disapproval of the extra work involved in dealing with some of the difficulties caused by children who spent what she believed to be inappropriately long hours in childcare situations:

*We’ve had to change the hours that the children are at Preschool to accommodate … all the children to have the same amount of time spent at Preschool and we need to deal with some of the difficulties of children within the community who come from childcare* (P6, p5).

Participant 6, in demonstrating her concern for the different home and care contexts for many young children today, reviewed and extended her program planning to include and accommodate parent needs and those of the childcare leaders bringing children to her program:

*We probably … we needed to make some changes. The different nature of the way children would be entering school and it was important for us to do that planning with parents as well as the school and the childcare centres* (P6, p5).

All the teachers in this study show an awareness of and concern about the impact of a rapidly changing future on their early childhood programs. In this section the particular and personal circumstances influencing these teachers’ perspectives on the
future of schooling have been outlined. In the next section of this chapter these teachers’ levels of commitment to changing their pedagogy will be considered.

7.4 TEACHER LEVEL OF COMMITMENT TO BEING PEDAGOGY CHANGE AGENTS

It was anticipated by DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers that REAL professional development training program would launch the Age of Entry policy, provide specific best practice training and create a collegial support network for all in attendance. There appears to be a strong correlation between the particular circumstances expressed by the participants in their teaching roles and environments and the degree of support afforded by school principals and DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers. The teachers’ particular circumstances also included their own professional research involvement and their personal levels of commitment to an ongoing pedagogy change that incorporates future schooling issues. Perspectives slid along the scale of ‘change is constant and we will grow with it’ to ‘change is annoyingly constant and we are finding it too overwhelming to cope with’. For those who saw opportunities for personal growth in accepting change, harmonious environments with happy teachers and children represented a positive and progressive result. For others, confusion and struggle appeared to dominate their environments, leaving them with the question of how long they should continue in their struggle with the all-consuming dominance of the future and its pressing demands on their present, already stressful circumstances.

Several teachers enthusiastically accommodated REAL’s creative, innovative ideas and new opportunities, recognising the value of keeping abreast of rapid change and therefore challenging themselves to address ongoing obstacles. Participant 2 valued active learning and regularly attended professional development programs. She was therefore enthusiastic about attending REAL and went determined to gain new information and ideas.

The active learning aspect of it … the play is something that fewer people are understanding or understand the real value of and so I see this opportunity to do this in-servicing brings teachers to this play idea and what play really is (P2, p2).
Participant 2 remained determined to be instrumental in making a difference to the young children in her Preschool program. It was her firm belief that today’s children must be given the strong beginning it would take for them to be able to cope in a more globally-aware world. Participant 2 reflected:

*Future schooling – it’s going to look very different to what we had in the last decade and I can see that if we do the right thing by these children, they’re going to have a lot of global issues that they’re going to be concerned with as adults. In order to deal with that, we’ve got to give them a really strong beginning* (P2, p3).

Many of this study’s participants admitted that, as teachers, it was their professional obligation to accept change concepts and to attempt to change their pedagogy accordingly. For Participant 6 it was an opportunity to do some creative and proactive planning with colleagues, in order to make her program more cohesive and suitable for accommodating what she perceived to be necessary changes.

*We considered many ideas and went with this particular option. It seems one that suits most people. For myself professionally, this is a wonderful option ... the amount ... to have some planning time with all staff together is ... it allows for ... a lot more cohesive and creative planning* (P6, p5).

For Participant 7 incremental change worked more effectively, allowing her to make steady progress, at a pace that she felt she was able to control. With each successful implementation of a change process in her program, Participant 7 gained new confidence and enthusiasm.

*I think [we] managed very well at adapting our program to these younger children, changed our expectations and ... implemented quite a few changes, lots. It was just refreshing and boosted my enthusiasm. It also reinforces what we were already doing and that we were on the right track* (P7, p5).

Participant 8 gained much professional satisfaction from making small, progressive adjustments to her Preschool routines and resources. Through constant observation of the children in her care and regular evaluation of her program, she remained alert to what the children really needed.

*So as professional people we looked at the children, we looked at their level of development and we changed sometimes the simplest routines ... we changed activities ... we physically had to change some equipment. Even now, after four years of working with early entry we still find that, depending on the group, it’s not always ... the same changes that are needed* (P8, p4).
Participant 2 remarked that being an agent of change, a role which she considered to be positive and desirable, was occasionally interpreted by parents as negative and undesirable. Earlier feelings of opposition and criticism from the children’s parents were just beginning to fade for her and were no longer causing her the concern she had initially experienced.

*That was one of the things that I tried out in the second year of Age of Entry, so that was the year before last (2004), so I don’t worry about the children getting up and wandering away. And it worked really well* (P2, p7).

For the above participants, attendance at REAL represented welcome reinvigoration and refreshment for their professional ideas and established pedagogies. Participants 2 and 9 enthusiastically applauded the invigoration and motivation offered through the REAL training program. They readily shared the confidence they had gained through their attendance there.

*I’ve got to say that the REAL kick-started it for me, took me to the next level and has kept me motivated in every aspect, not just my pet issues. I’ve now broadened it out and so, regardless of the fact that maybe most of the REAL I was already aware of and everything, it’s putting it into practice and it’s actually the way you put it into practice. I can see the difference* (P2, p7).

*I do find that REAL itself and in fact the whole of the Early Years program has given us the confidence to feel confident about the changes that we have made in our teaching practice … We’ve just become more realistic about seeing where children are and trying to provide them with the best activities that we can to meet their needs* (P9, p5).

For Participant 6, the critical elements of relationships, environments, active learning and language, presented at REAL, affirmed much of what she already considered to be critical elements of her interpretation of best practice. Acknowledging the affirmation of her concept of best practice that she had received through her attendance at REAL, she added:

*Yes I think so in the way we plan, the structure of our school and how we set things up. Really, in a lot of different areas in our programming, the way, things that we make within the community, the whole set up of our Preschool and the environment. All those things I think we’ve been affected by it and encouraged that, some of the things we were doing were good and we needed to keep going with them and add to that* (P6, p4).

However, levels of commitment to change ultimately varied for each participant and were dependent on each teacher’s particular circumstances rather than on any innate
determination to be agents of pedagogy change. Participant 2 reflected on the immense amount of motivation required for teachers to overcome the demanding challenges of the future in their personal and teaching environments. It was her belief that for some teachers, especially those new to the service, the struggle would be too costly and that other alternatives to teaching would be sought by them shortly after commencing their teaching careers. Participant 2 reflected on the thinking of many neophyte teachers who would find their workload overwhelming and therefore begin to consider other, less demanding jobs:

‘This is giving me no personal satisfaction. I work my guts out. Nothing seems to get any better. And nobody’s listening to me. No, I’m going to do something else. I’m going to get pregnant or … something’ (P2, p15).

To Participant 2’s regret, these neophyte teachers would move on and their valuable teacher training skills would be used in other workplaces.

And they move on. And teachers are well sought after in other jobs… it’s very easy to get into computing, particularly computer training. A teacher can get a job there any day and probably earn more for a while as well (P2, p15).

Participant 5, well-established in a Preschool teaching position, was suddenly and unwillingly transferred to a Transition class teaching role. This was a decision made by the school principal to encourage all teachers to take on new professional challenges but was perceived by Participant 5 to be yet one more undesirable change initiative in her school. For Participant 5, addressing the critical elements of Relationships and Partnerships, Environments, Active Learning Approach and Language Development promoted through REAL were of minor significance and almost irrelevant, in comparison to the huge personal upheaval she was experiencing in her move from a familiar, well-established and supported Preschool program to a less familiar and much more challenging environment of a Transition classroom.

This year in particular I’d say I haven’t felt so much related to the REAL workshop activities. I’m moving onto where the children are going from Preschool into school. That’s been really hard (P5, p5).

7.5 CONCLUSION

DEET (NT) continues to develop the strategic directions for education which are envisaged to meet teacher and future school needs. These strategic directions are
intended to incorporate an awareness and assessment of global and local demands in a universal twenty-first century approach to early childhood education. Twenty-first century global education is emphasising social, cultural and moral dimensions that bring a renewed sense of purpose, challenge and opportunity. Teacher engagement in high quality, relevant professional development is desirable, indeed essential in the accelerated educational and social pace of the twenty-first century. However, the range and quality of professional development programs can only be effective if priority is given by the program’s organisers to the intended purposes and relevant activities of the program and its ongoing support networks.

While some personal and school circumstances were outside of their immediate control, all participants in this study had equity of access to the same level of professional development training through attendance at REAL. Principal DEET (NT) organiser for REAL stated that the proposed outcomes of this professional development program were “meant to design small steps for teachers’ own learning” and to “shift their practice” (G.N.3, 4). It is evident that all teachers in this study took some steps, some perhaps only minimally and made some degree of “shift [in] their practice”.

The findings of Proposition Three suggest that the implementation of pedagogical change in participants’ programs was enhanced or hindered by the participant’s own perspectives about the future and by the circumstances each participant allowed herself to be influenced by. Perspectives of future schooling were addressed by all participants, although with varying degrees of interest and urgency. Expressed awareness of rapidly changing social and generational constructs and global issues, revealed that most of the early childhood teachers in this study had in some manner confronted the challenges these issues afforded outside the REAL professional development program.

Added to their personal feelings of inadequacy to meet the challenges of rapidly changing social and generational constructs and global issues the teachers expressed concerns over the imposed Age of Entry Trial and its related professional development training program, REAL. Considering themselves to be very experienced early childhood practitioners, these teachers did not share the future
schooling views of the DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers. The teachers believed that these officers’ had mistakenly interpreted the Australian Federal Government’s 2010 requirements for a single age of entry into school to equate to an early age of entry.

For Participant 3 the statement made by DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers that research was used to substantiate the values underpinning the Age of Entry Trial was not sufficient to convince her that such a major change in policy was justified. As no research data relating to the Age of Entry Trial was provided for participants it could be equally argued that there is no current research to indicate that many Australian children are smarter or more successful because they start school at a younger age than those in other countries.

There is no conclusive evidence in this study to suggest that attendance at REAL professional development training program or the implementation of the Age of Entry Trial were the catalysts for these teachers to address future schooling issues or to become more effective early childhood education pedagogy change agents. However, it is concluded that REAL provided a vehicle for NT early childhood teachers to re-define, re-direct, reinforce, reinvigorate and re-evaluate their ideas, perspectives and pedagogy and re-consider concepts of best early childhood practice.

The next chapter provides the conclusion to this study. It addresses the study’s purpose, context and methodology. Following the concluding statements for these three study components, the theoretical propositions and participant population findings will be considered and elaborated upon. Recommendations for the implementation of policies, changes to practice and current and future research will conclude this study.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 INTRODUCTION
This study is an interpretive qualitative project in which the research paradigm is interpretivism, the theoretical position is symbolic interactionsism and the research methods have involved the collection and analysis of participant data from semi-structured interviews. This chapter will revise the purpose and context of the study and will summarise its methodology, findings and recommendations for policy, practice and further research.

8.2 PURPOSE OF STUDY
This study was designed to investigate the perspectives of early childhood teachers on how they have managed changes to their teaching practice in the context of their exposure to a specified professional development training program. It encompasses what these teachers think, believe, predict, conceptualise and evaluate with regard to the value of this form of professional development training and the resulting actions, orientations, dispositions and attitudes they adopted. The study has generated a set of theoretical propositions regarding these perspectives.

8.3 CONTEXT OF STUDY
In this study, data was collected from nine early childhood practitioners who were all teaching in Preschool or Transition class settings in the education system of the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia. In the NT Preschools come under the direction of DEET (NT) as do all Transition classes. The Early Years Framework, a DEET (NT) curriculum initiative, had been introduced to all Preschools and Transition classes in 2004. This Early Years Framework included an Age of Entry Trial which required teachers in early childhood settings to accept children into their Preschool programs at the age of three and a half years and into Transition classes at the age of four and a half years, in keeping with a national priority by governments to enhance the quality of early childhood education across Australia. Previously children had entered Preschool programs at the age of four and Transition classes at the age of five.
DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers proposed the introduction of the *Age of Entry Trial* in the following manner:

In expectation of national requirements being mandated by 2010, the Age of Entry Trial has been developed to ensure NT schools are on track with respect to the Australian Government’s requirements for all states and territories to move to a nationally consistent single age intake policy for Transition (Curriculum Services Division, 2005).

Phase one of the *Age of Entry Trial* commenced in January, 2004, originally in ten Preschools and Transition classes across the NT. Each subsequent year saw more schools undertaking this trial, until 2007 when the introduction across fifty-three NT schools was completed. All teachers were promised an $11,000 start-up grant, to be used for physical teaching resources, part-time instructor assistance and the support of teachers through further professional development training. DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers provided professional development training in the form of *REAL* to assist teachers in re-assessing their programs and re-structuring their learning environments to adapt to the younger children who would now be attending their programs.

The need for teachers to provide quality care and education for very young children outside the home environment has been increasing in direct proportion to the influx of women entering salaried employment over the last thirty years. The provision of such quality care programs for children has been under constant review by governments in Australia. *The Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care* (ECEC) Policy, launched in 1998 by the OECD Education Committee recognised early childhood development as the foundation of human learning and development (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006). It was from this initial 1998 OECD Review and an Australian Federal Government mandate for a single age of entry into school for young children, set for the year 2010, that DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers commenced their review into an appropriate single age of entry policy and subsequently organised a professional development training program, *REAL* to assist early childhood teachers in their implementation of that policy. The *REAL* program and teachers’ perspectives of their professional development training were the focus of this study.
All early childhood teachers in this study had, at various times over a three year period, attended the professional development training program, *REAL*, yet all were experiencing varying degrees of frustration, dissatisfaction and other related difficulties in their teaching environments. It was through collegial dialogue and general observation of difficulties experienced by these teachers that a desire to discover the underlying causes arose and this study evolved.

Data collection for this study was compiled from face-to-face interviews with the teachers after their three-day attendance at the *REAL* program and their subsequent return to respective teaching environments. Audio-recorded data was transcribed and analysed for findings that would capture the perspectives on how the teachers had managed *REAL* training program’s knowledge to change or enhance their pedagogy.

This study is underpinned by current research on the effects of rapid local and global social and generational changes in current and future schooling (Senge et al. 2000, Beare and Slaughter, 1993, McCain and Jukes, 2001). Its focus is on the fundamental shift that teachers are required to make if they are to find success, satisfaction or even survival in their chosen teaching career. The writing of Bussey (2004), Leach (1994), Palmer (2006) and Walker (2005) all convey the message that, as the behaviour of many children becomes more challenging, teachers face an overwhelming stress due to rapid social change and society’s constantly rising expectations (Elkind, 2001).

### 8.4 METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

The method for this study began with a systematic reflection on the needs and procedure for an investigation into the perspectives of teachers. The *ontology* employed in this study was based on the recognition of a changing reality within the teaching profession and, therefore, the *ontological* position underpinning this study has addressed those changing realities, considering what was perceived to be true, what was inferred and how teachers justified those beliefs.

This study’s *epistemological* position was embedded in *constructionism*, in which meanings were constructed by participant interpretation of their engagement within their teaching practice and environments. The study was identified as an *interpretive, qualitative* paradigm of research, within the social sciences field of *symbolic*
interactionism. This interpretive, qualitative form of research has determined how the problem of this study, namely that of investigating the perspectives of teachers on how they have, or have not managed change to their teaching practice, was formulated and interrogated. It is guided by a grounded theory approach, based on the premise that the emergent theories of the research came primarily from the data collected through face-to-face interviews with teacher participants.

In this study, purposive sampling, using small, information-rich samples selected to purposefully focus on issues was assessed to be the most appropriate, for the collection of data. The following data collection prompt questions were asked during participant interviews:

1. You have recently participated in a professional development program, REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers. What do you think was the official meaning of the term?
2. What do you think about this use of the term? Do you agree with it? Why?
3. Are there any ways in which you disagree with the intended meaning? If so, what are they? Why?
4. Is it important to you that you specifically address future schooling issues in your teaching practice?
5. How can you tell if you are successfully addressing those issues?
6. How can you tell when you are not successfully addressing them?
7. What are you trying to achieve in your teaching practice based on your learning from the REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers professional development program?
8. How realistic is this?
9. What would the implications for teaching and learning be if your teaching practice did not change?
10. Is there anything with regards to your participation in the REAL program that you wish to add?

Chapter Three makes explicit the research methods, participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis and ethics issues that led up to the formulation of the interrelated theoretical propositions presented in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

8.5 FINDINGS OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to collect data from participants of the REAL program through face-to-face interviews which were guided by the research questions. Further, it was intended to formulate a set of theoretical propositions regarding the perspectives of the early childhood teacher participants on how they managed changes to their teaching practice in the context of their exposure to the REAL professional
development training program. Of the seventy-two invitations forwarded to all REAL participants in October, 2006, through DEET (NT) electronic mail, with a repeat invitation several weeks later, only nine teachers eventually volunteered to be interviewed. Reasons for the low number of participants could be investigated, but this was not done in this study.

Due to the limitations placed on this research because of its minimal study population, no attempt to generalise the research findings from this small sample has been pursued. Rather, the findings have been generated to provide deeper insights into the research problem under question here.

Interview transcripts from these nine participants provided sufficient data for analysis and for the formulation of the three preceding theoretical propositions. Reasons for the low number of participants have been speculated upon and are further discussed later in this chapter.

The findings of this study have been elaborated in three categories, which are directly related to the theoretical propositions formulated through the analysis of the findings. These findings are:

1. Teachers in early childhood settings approve in principle of the single *Age of Entry*[into school] policy, with its associated *REAL* professional development training program, but identify feelings of apprehension and resentment towards the inclusive policy of an early *Age of Entry* [into school] and the lack of organisational support provided to implement this policy.

2. Teachers in early childhood settings acknowledge that rapid social and generational classroom changes pose personal and pedagogical constraints, which influence their conceptual interpretation of the term *best practice*, as advocated throughout the professional development program, *REAL*.

3. Teachers in early childhood settings deem their particular circumstances to influence both their perception of future schooling and their level of commitment to being pedagogy change agents. In their view this is integral to the implementation of the early childhood reform advocated in the NT.
The first proposition portrays the participants’ perspectives on the proposal and introduction of the *Age of Entry Trial* and policy and the professional development program associated with the policy’s introduction, *REAL*. A key finding of the study is:

Teachers approve the single *Age of Entry* policy and its associated professional development training program, *REAL*, but expressed feelings of apprehension and resentment towards the inclusive policy of an early *Age of Entry* and the lack of organisational support provided to implement this policy.

The teachers in this study were in agreement with the introduction of a single age of entry to school bringing the NT in line with Federal Government 2010 mandate of introducing uniformity in the age of entry to school throughout Australia. It was agreed by the teachers that the need to address a single or uniform age of entry for young children across Australia was appropriate and timely. Teachers in the NT recognise that many children are disadvantaged through a high and constant rate of population mobility to and from the NT. A single age of entry into school programs across Australia was therefore seen as advantageous, in providing some stability and continuity in children’s learning programs across Australia. Early childhood development and the young child’s transition to formal schooling had also been listed as a priority in the twelve point action plan of the steering committee of the *Adelaide Declaration National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century, Federalist Paper 2: The Future of Schooling in Australia: A Report by the States and Territories* (Dawkins, 2007). The teachers in this study therefore initially welcomed discussion on establishing uniformity in the age of entry into Preschools and schools across the NT.

DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division policy makers, in their response to the Federal Government 2010 mandate (based on the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 1998 and 2001 reviews) applied themselves to address the issue of children’s preparation for schooling. The policy makers considered a single and earlier age of entry into school programs to be a key element for young children’s successful life-long learning. This earlier age of entry represented a shift from four years of age to enter Preschool and five years of age to enter Transition
class (the first year of primary schooling in the NT), to three and a half years for Preschool and four and a half years for Transition class.

This move to introduce an earlier age of entry was seen by the teachers of this study to be premature and over-reactionary, as a uniform age of entry was still being debated across the states and territories and no conclusive agreement had been reached. It was later learned from a statement by the General Manager Teaching, Learning and Standards (NT) (Efthymiades, 2007) that the 2010 mandate for a single age of entry into schooling had been placed on hold due to a definitive Australian single age entry point continuing to be debated across the states and territories.

The teachers’ perspectives presented in this study reflect their approval of the content of the REAL professional development training program. They readily shared their enthusiasm over ideas and concepts in the program that they believed to be relevant, informative and applicable in their own teaching environments. The modules within REAL included the study of active, flexible and diverse Relationships and Partnerships, safe, secure and stimulating Environments, Active child centred Learning Approach and effective Language Development (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2005). Each of these was considered by the teachers to be a valuable component of sound early childhood practice and therefore a worthwhile addition to the content of the training program.

This satisfaction with the content of REAL was accompanied by teacher feelings of personal refreshment and invigoration and their satisfaction with the opportunities provided during the program for collaboration with colleagues. For some teachers, these feelings were of a very temporary nature as they acknowledged feelings of frustration when, upon return to their teaching environments, more urgent school matters demanded their time and energy and REAL’s impact faded rapidly.

Some teachers expressed disapproval and discontent over the fact that their input was not sought or considered at any time during the planning and implementation of the professional development training course, REAL. This was reported by these teachers as a lack of recognition of the collective expertise of school based early childhood educators. The teachers also expressed negative attitudes about the implicit purpose,
or hidden agenda, of the professional development training program, REAL, they were asked to attend. It became apparent to them that the sole purpose of REAL was to prepare early childhood teachers for the introduction of the Age of Entry Trial. The discovery, during REAL, of this previously unclear DEET (NT) agenda, influenced the teachers’ interview responses and reactions more intensely than was first anticipated.

The negative responses and reactions captured during interviews were further compounded by a sense of betrayal in the DEET (NT) suggestion of the policy as a trial, when in fact it was presented by the organisers of REAL as a ‘fait accompli’, or non-negotiable. As the study unfolded it had become clear to all participants that there would be a requirement for all early childhood educators in the NT to introduce the policy at some stage over the next three years. It was further made clear during the REAL professional development program that there was an immediate expectation that fifty-three NT schools would have complied with the introduction of the Age of Entry Trial within the next three year period. The teachers involved in this study therefore believed that the Age of Entry Trial could not rightly be called a trial, but rather an imposed policy. This generated feelings of resentment.

This study found that most of the participants reacted negatively, rather than positively to the Age of Entry Trial. A sense of alienation is evident throughout the data presented in this study, suggesting that the early childhood teachers and DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers have a limited working knowledge of each others’ role and work domain.

The second key finding of this study considers the early childhood teachers’ perspectives concerning the personal and pedagogical constraints posed by rapid social and generational classroom changes and the influences of these constraints on the teachers’ conceptual interpretation of the term best practice.

The second key finding is:
Teachers acknowledge that rapid social and generational classroom changes posed personal and pedagogical constraints and thereby influenced their conceptual
interpretation of the term *best practice*, as advocated in the professional development program, *REAL*.

The teachers involved in this study expressed disapproval over the earlier age of entry decision, which represented to these experienced early childhood practitioners a lack of understanding of *best* early childhood *practice*. They believed the introduction of the younger-aged child into structured Preschool and formal school curriculum to be professionally unsound. Collectively representing several decades of what they considered to be early childhood expertise, these teachers expressed strong opinions about the need for children to be developmentally ready for progression to a more formal learning approach.

The teachers in this study represented variability in location, practitioner philosophy and chosen educational approaches, yet all believed that an earlier age of entry for young children into inadequately resourced learning environments did not satisfy their perception of *best practice*. Prior to the *Age of Entry Trial* policy’s introduction date, these early childhood educators had enjoyed a level of autonomy, experiencing decision-making freedom with regard to a child’s appropriate age and readiness for the more formal learning of Preschool and Transition class programs. They remained adamant in their philosophical and pedagogical beliefs that an earlier age of entry was not synonymous with a better age of entry.

Concepts of child-centred, quality and play-based programs and developmentally appropriate practice appear to be equally understood and valued by the teachers in this study and DEET (NT) project officers. In its reference to quality workforce the curriculum document states that its purpose is to:

> Connect all Early Years educators and carers in NT contexts with shared philosophies, principles and practices of evidence-based quality programs and approaches (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: p.7).

However, uniformity in the understood meaning of the concept of *best practice* is not apparent between the teachers and the project officers as revealed in this study. An earlier age of entry into early childhood programs, with less financial and resource support and a perceived trend away from play-based programs was reported by
teachers as creating conflicting issues for these teachers in their ability to provide *best practice* programs.

It is the consensus of this group of early childhood teachers that play-based programs and not those focussed on literacy and numeracy skills development, are synonymous with their understanding of *best practice* and therefore preferable programs in Preschool and Transition class settings. This created further alienation between the thinking of the DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division policy makers and these early childhood practitioners, who felt pressured through the *REAL* program into introducing formal literacy and numeracy activities earlier than they believed appropriate. These teachers confidently believed that, in spite of society’s rapid pace, young children benefit more from play-based programming, which to them represents developmentally appropriate *best practice*. It is the teachers’ perspective that the organisers of the *REAL* professional development program did not share the early childhood teachers’ concept of play-based, developmentally appropriate *best practice*.

Many of these teachers acknowledged that their pre-1980s teacher training did not adequately prepare them to deal with the pedagogical constraints posed by the rapid explosion of information technology. Two participants alluded to their personal research on future schooling issues, especially in the explosion of technological development and children’s “virtual reality” lifestyles, but recognised that keeping up with the rapid pace of technology development was difficult for them. The *REAL* program failed to deal with this issue.

Further, it became apparent that the ongoing rapid change in child and teacher exposure to information technology, together with its many demands to learn and implement new skills, caused discomfort and anxiety for some of these teachers. A general awareness that a focus on the presentation of societal and educational change in post-1980s teacher training programs better equips younger teachers to deal with change issues in technology was evident among those whose initial teacher training was pre-1980s.

The participants testified to the immediate and future influences in their teaching programs, posed by rapid social and generational changes. They revealed varying
levels of concern over the noticeable changes in young children’s behaviours and the need to strengthen their programs considerably if they were to continue to cater for the unique developmental stages of these children and their now vastly changing childhoods. All teachers showed a preference for play-based programs as the most appropriate and suitable program style for the very young children in their care.

Expressions of betrayal were directed toward the DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division policy makers for not including the early childhood teachers, who considered they were experts in early childhood practice, in the consultation process of the Age of Entry policy and subsequent trial. These expressions may, however, have been the result of misinformation. It is clearly stated in Strong Beginnings: An explicit guide to Quality Practice in the Early Years program that the Early Years Framework and Age of Entry Trial was developed by an initial working group of approximately fifty early years’ educators. It states:

A core group of nine writers have worked on this project in addition to their usual duties in schools over two years. The project has a reference group of representatives from key stakeholder organisations for quality assurance and feedback about constituents needs. The Northern Territory Board of Studies has also monitored the progress of this project (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007: Introductory Statement).

It is evident from the above statement that a representative group of early childhood educators was involved in the development of the proposed policy and curriculum. One of these policy and curriculum writers was also a participant of this study. It could be argued that the feelings of betrayal of the other teachers in this study were actually disappointment for a lack of communication between policy writers and the teachers themselves during the document’s consultation and developmental process. This requires further research and is not a purpose of this study.

The next and third proposition relates to the relevance of the teachers’ particular circumstances to their perception of future schooling and their personal level of commitment to accepting and managing change in their early childhood settings.

This third key finding of the study states:

Teachers recognise that particular circumstances influenced both their perception of future schooling and their level of professional commitment to being pedagogy
change agents following their participation in the REAL professional development training program.

Disappointment was expressed by the teachers, after their attendance at REAL, due to the fact that the implementation of new learning and the expectations of attempting to change practice were made difficult through a lack of organisational support. It is evident that the teachers related favourably to REAL content, but the long term benefits of REAL were overshadowed by feelings of disappointment and even abandonment. Some of the teachers told of their feelings of desertion or loneliness in having to implement changes which they considered to be undesirable, without an assurance of continued financial or human resource assistance. These teachers expressed apprehension that problems would be created by the entry of very young children into more formal programs at an age that they, the early childhood teachers, did not consider appropriate. This apprehension was compounded by feelings of separation from policy and program organisers, school principals and even colleagues, some of whom had little idea of the policy’s implications.

Further disappointment was revealed when the teachers discovered that continued financial support for the purchase of equipment and the facilitation of resources, including human resources, would not be forthcoming. That the initial support provided was to be withdrawn after a short period of time was reported as a further insult to teachers, who were well cognisant of the financial demands of best early childhood practice.

The early childhood teachers in this study reported that they were confident in their interpretation of best practice. This caused a measure of conflict between them and the DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers who were now imposing a policy which these teachers did not believe represented best practice. Most of these teachers believed that their years of early childhood experience qualified them to disagree with DEET (NT) officers and to oppose the introduction of the Age of Entry Trial. It was evident that these teachers portrayed a confidence in their own early childhood expertise and wished to be allowed to nominate their own level of commitment to being agents of change.
The findings of this section of the study reveal that the teachers modified their pedagogical practice to an extent relative to the value they placed on such change to their environments and programs. Thus the impact of the REAL program, according to the teachers’ perspectives, ranged from minimal to moderate on their personal, professional and pedagogical practice.

8.6 RECOMMENDATIONS OF STUDY
The main aim of the study reported in this thesis was to formulate theoretical propositions regarding the perspectives of early childhood teachers on how they have managed or did not manage changes to their teaching practice in the context of their exposure to a specified professional development training program. In the following section of the chapter, recommendations that this set of theoretical propositions have for policy, practice and future research will be presented in turn.

8.6.1 Recommendations for Policy
The teachers involved in this study agreed that policy and project development for DEET (NT) is the role of its Curriculum Services Division officers. They were also in agreement with the significance of an NT early childhood education review based on the research findings of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001) and that this review was within the scope of the DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers’ role. The development of the Early Years Framework was welcomed by early childhood teachers and the resultant Strong Beginnings program, available for all early childhood teachers online and in hard copy format, is considered to be a very comprehensive and useful document.

However, it was apparent that attitudinal barriers exist, inhibiting these teachers’ full cooperation and involvement in the review of the Trial draft (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2005) and the resultant Strong Beginnings (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007) document at the level first anticipated.

One active approach that the officers could have adopted was to facilitate the inclusion of all early childhood teachers in negotiating the policy and its introduction. A reciprocal flow of input and output through forums and discussion panels would
indicate mutual respect for policy writer and practitioner expertise. The benefits of such reciprocity include the joint development of a policy that all early childhood teachers would more readily accept and be willing to implement.

Another recommendation relates to an unspoken separation that has existed between DEET (NT) employers and employees. There has, over a lengthy period, been a ‘them versus us’ tension between DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers and classroom practitioners. One participant who had been involved in the initial stage of the above review and policy development later distanced herself from the project, for undisclosed reasons. Interview data from this participant suggests that her teaching expertise was insufficiently recognised in the policy making decision, thereby making her continued involvement personally untenable. DEET (NT) officers would do well to address these teacher attitudes through the recognition of the teachers’ collective expertise, extending to them future invitations to participate in both minor and major decision-making opportunities.

A further active approach for DEET (NT) officers would be a process of continued collaboration, in which officers and teachers shared teaching and policy designing and development responsibilities, thereby enabling each person to better understand the values, skills and knowledge the other brings to the task of quality teaching, policy and curriculum development.

The decision by DEET (NT) to change the age of children’s entry into Preschool and Transition classes through the Age of Entry policy was later found to have been premature. A recent National Curriculum Studies statement claims that the national mandate around the age of entry:

has been shelved and there are still some discussions to be had about what consistency will look like – not sure that it will be much different to what is in the current Adelaide Declaration which is an agreement not to disadvantage any child who has commence their pre-compulsory or formal schooling in another State or Territory, even if they do not fit within local policy guidelines (Efthymiades, 2007).

A further recommendation therefore is for DEET (NT) policy makers to fully immerse themselves in continued consultation between Australian states and
territories, with a view to establishing a nationally, not locally, agreed policy for a single age of entry for young children into school.

8.6.2 Recommendations for Practice

It is evident from the study data that REAL professional development training program was effective and was valued by the study’s participants for its establishment of collaborative learning opportunities. Regular, ongoing professional sharing and collaborative learning is recommended, to ensure that the learning gained during the initial REAL training program continues to develop and strengthen. This could include regular visits to schools by DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division policy makers and their active participation in the programs they have set out to create. It is further recommended that reciprocal policy maker and early childhood teacher modelling of innovative pedagogy through a willingness to share curriculum development and teaching roles would go some way to reduce the current distance between the officers and early childhood teachers. Such an approach would also optimise the adoption of the Strong Beginnings (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2007) curriculum, released in the second half of the 2007 teaching year and now mandated for all NT early childhood educators.

The teachers in this study expressed disappointment that only limited opportunity was given for them to demonstrate their own best practice during and after their attendance at REAL. Classroom busy schedules and school funding do not currently allow teachers time to organise and enjoy collegial sharing opportunities. A further recommendation is that an allocation of time be made available by DEET (NT) policy makers for teachers to visit other early childhood programs, for observation and reciprocal sharing of best practice purposes. In this manner the collegiality initially experienced during REAL would be effectively extended and enhanced.

Four years after the Age of Entry policy’s implementation the introduction of an earlier age of entry for children into Preschool and Transition classes continues to cause concern for the participants of this study. It is recommended that a review of the policy’s effectiveness and intended outcomes take place between the DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers who initiated the project and the early childhood teachers affected by the policy’s directives. A review process would
enable the effectiveness of the Age of Entry policy and the outcomes of the REAL professional development training program to be suitably evaluated and assessed.

To ensure purposeful professional growth for all teachers, this study recommends that greater collaboration takes place between DEET (NT) organisers and NT early childhood teachers, to encourage the sharing of experiences, expertise and resources that directly relate to the teachers’ needs and ultimately student developmental needs. Greater collaboration between organisers and participants would also increase coherence and effectiveness in the purpose and proposed outcomes of future professional development programs.

By way of introduction to the REAL professional development training program, the writing of Dr Hedley Beare (2001) was distributed by DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers to all participants, prior to their attendance. In his future-world scenario writing, Beare (2001) created a five year old child of the future, Angelica, who confidently expressed her observations and opinions of the world she now lived in. Angelica posed many questions to her teachers about her own future and her teachers’ ability to adequately teach her the skills she needed to cope in her vastly changing world.

It is unclear if REAL program organisers intended to use Beare’s (2001) research writing to challenge the early childhood teachers to be more responsive to the many social and educational needs of contemporary children. Discussion of this writing by Beare (2001) did not take place during the three-day REAL program. When participants was queried about this writing’s significant role during any part of the professional training modules the response was negative. DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers may have assumed that when teachers are presented with research reading and are actively engaged in professional development training courses their knowledge base will expand and thereby their professional expertise will be enhanced. Explicit reference to Beare’s (2001) writing during the three-day program may have assisted those teachers, whose last formal studies were several years or even decades ago, to access current literature, media and other educational resources and thereby better equip themselves for the changing nature of their work.
A professional expertise development dilemma exists for the teachers in this study, who readily acknowledge that their busy programs do not allow time for research or professional studies. It is possible that the provision of opportunities to discuss the writing of Beare (2001) at the time of REAL would have engaged teachers to become more involved in active investigation of future early childhood education challenges. Such active investigation may also have facilitated the teachers’ discovery of plausible and acceptable solutions to these challenges. This may have initiated a process of appropriate, effective pedagogy change and may also have encouraged the participants to enthusiastically embrace opportunities for their own professional growth and life-long learning process.

For many teachers in this study the professional development training program REAL was isolated. Interview data evidence verifies that participants needed prompting to identify the critical elements of REAL’s acronym. Participant data also suggest that there is little evidence of any long term effectiveness in pedagogy change or further teacher research initiatives as a result of the teacher’s involvement in the REAL professional development modules.

It is recommended that teachers be encouraged to initiate and engage in their own research as a result of and integral to professional development programs. This is by far the most purposeful and appropriate form of continuous improvement and evaluation of teacher pedagogy. Several studies reinforce the need for contemporary teachers to have regular, continued access to research and professional development resources (Johnson, 2006, O’Brien, 2007, Bartlett, 2007, Halford, 2007).

Johnson (2006) suggests that the conventional, traditional view of professional development programs, with the transmission of knowledge from external program developers as ‘educators with expertise’ and the participating teacher as a ‘target of change’, has outlived its effectiveness for teachers. Contemporary professional development activities, according to Johnson, need to encourage teacher inquiry and collegial, collaborative learning, through which the teacher becomes more actively involved in initiating change.
It is therefore suggested that conversations centred on futures education and schooling, such as Beare’s (2001) writing, would encourage contemporary teachers to be involved in inquiry and collegial collaboration at a critical time in their profession. Although this suggestion may place limitations on schools through the cost of employing emergency relief teachers (ERTs), if such collegial collaborations are conducted during school hours. This type of research inquiry may lead to more effective changes in the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers.

The teachers’ perspectives in this study show that they did not demonstrate an ability to confidently articulate their learning and, as a result, make appropriate pedagogical changes. The literature considers a professional development training program to be successful when its participants demonstrate confident articulation of their learning and the implementation of appropriate pedagogical change in their teaching environments. When professional development programs are organised collaboratively between educators and those to be educated (in this situation, DEET, NT Curriculum Services Division policy makers and early childhood teachers), a sharing of collective experiences and expertise occurs and a connection develops between the responsibilities of the program organisers and the needs of the teachers for whom the training programs are prepared. So from this perspective, the implementation of REAL was misaligned with the professional needs of teachers.

Many current, best intended professional development programs do not appear to address existing needs or beliefs for all teachers as the starting point for professional development. It is therefore necessary to implement radical changes in emphases, if professional development training programs are to have the ongoing degrees of success that program developers assume and anticipate. Such radical changes now need to progress from traditional styles of professional development training programs into contemporary agendas. There is plentiful literature (Bartlett, 2007; Department for Education and Skills, 2007; O’Brien, 2007; Johnson, 2006) to support this research finding.

The following table reinforces the findings of Johnson (2006) and suggests how changes in emphases, from a traditional focus, on knowledge transmission and a focus
on the individual to professional development that is inquiry based and collaborative should be the brief of effective professional development:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From Traditional Professional Development, in which:</th>
<th>To Contemporary Professional Development, in which:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is transmitted</td>
<td>There is inquiry of teaching and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is individual learning</td>
<td>There is collegial and collaborative learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a reliance on external expertise</td>
<td>There is a mix of internal and external expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff developers are the educators</td>
<td>Staff developers are facilitators, consultants and planners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are followers</td>
<td>Teachers are leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are individuals based in classrooms</td>
<td>Teachers are members of collegial professional communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are targets of change</td>
<td>Teachers are sources and facilitators of change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Traditional and Contemporary Professional Development Training Program Agendas

For several decades, early childhood teachers have participated in predominantly traditional forms of professional development training programs, in which the program developers have been the educators and the teachers the passive recipients of someone else’s knowledge. It is apparent from the perspectives of the teachers in this study that the impact of these traditional programs is not lasting. It is recommended that DEET (NT) organisers ensure that future professional development programs offered for and on behalf of early childhood teachers provide maximum opportunities for these teachers to participate in active research, sharing of ideas and practice. When the program organisers recognise teachers as leaders and themselves as facilitators, with leaders and facilitators sharing a collective expertise, teachers will be further encouraged to become the sources and facilitators of their own change.

A noticeable constraint for the teachers in this study was their anxiety over the limited funding allocated to the implementation of the Age of Entry Trial and the REAL program’s critical elements. Given the teachers’ increasing awareness of the pedagogic importance of reliable financial support for effective, high quality early childhood programs, it is difficult to understand that funding for the policy introduction and program development decreased rather than increased. The
perspectives of these teachers indicated that DEET (NT) officers had either failed to budget adequately or had passed on the financial responsibility to school principals.

Schools in the NT are autonomous in governance and therefore manage budgets independently, based on each school’s current priorities. Funding allocations from DEET (NT) which are specifically designated for the development of Preschool and Transition class environments, in contemporary contexts, will go some way in alleviating the teachers’ current concerns. The recently elected Labor Federal Government (November, 2007) stated that one of its priorities was to improve the status of early childhood programs throughout Australia. The year 2008 is seemingly an appropriate time for DEET (NT) personnel and early childhood teachers to corporately address the issue of advocacy for early childhood programs in the NT and request local and federal government funding assistance. The perspectives of teachers in this study indicate a way forward.

Inherent in this recommendation of greater collaboration is the involvement of school principals, school staff and community representatives to ensure that the implementation of proposed policies and ideas are supported and integrated into the ongoing life of the school. It is suggested that extended school and community involvement would alleviate participant feelings of isolation and broaden their perspectives to include the considered views of other educational leaders and those of the community they are striving to serve.

A subtle antagonism toward child-care centres, suggestive of different carer and educator expectations and program styles, was detected amongst the participant group. It is recommended that early childhood teachers and care givers, in consultation with DEET (NT) review their programs, with a view to developing consistency in early childhood curriculum implementation and to the establishment of “appropriate pedagogical frameworks which are fundamental to high quality early childhood education and care” across all contexts (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001: p.109).

This study explored how teachers have managed, or not managed, changes to their teaching practice in the context of their exposure to appropriate professional
development training programs. It has determined the perspectives and the attitudes influencing these perspectives, of a group of early childhood teachers. However, it has not been able to achieve a comprehensive conclusion due to the fact that only nine teachers were interviewed. Thus the study and its findings remain partial. Further research is required with a broader representative group of stakeholders.

The researcher’s personal and continued involvement in learning through professional development and current research programs affirm the conviction that DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers sought to introduce superior early childhood practice in the NT through its prompt attention to the Federal Government’s 2010 mandate for a single age of entry policy into Australian schools. There is a strong link in this study between the genuine intentions of DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division officers to guide teachers into futures pedagogy and the teachers own levels of resistance to, or acceptance of the DEET (NT) proposed program of change. Further research of the following type is required.

8.6.3 Recommendations for Research

This study has provided many insights into early childhood teacher perspectives relating to the introduction of a new policy and its associated training program, teacher awareness of escalating social and generational classroom changes, teacher personal and pedagogical constraints posed by such changes on their practice and teacher perspectives toward being agents of change. However, it has clearly addressed only a small number of early childhood teachers, all of whom have been teaching for twenty years or more and who are highly regarded as committed professional educators.

Given the similar ages and length of teaching practice of each participant it is significant to address possible reasons for these teachers’ apparent commitment to and engagement in their work whilst resisting change. The majority of participants in this study undertook teacher training between 1970 and 1985. The traditional teacher training course of that period entailed a minimum of three years with an optional fourth year to acquire Bachelor degree status. Teaching was then a desirable and highly esteemed profession and teachers were able to exercise a high level of professional judgement in their decision making (Groundwater-Smith, 2007). Whilst
teachers regarded their profession as a demanding one, they maintained their personal commitment to their job, raised their families and enjoyed the benefits of substantial salaries and sufficient periods of recreation.

In the 1990s and early twenty-first century the luxury of teachers being able to devolve and modify Government educational directives disappeared (Groundwater-Smith, 2007). Education at the time of this study’s commencement was undergoing constant change, not the least of which was the NT Government’s decision to alter the Age of Entry to School policy. The participants of this study represent a group of committed teachers struggling to deal with major changes for which they feel inadequately trained to deal with and which they are unwilling to commit excessive amounts of time and energy to. They themselves struggle to find a balance between new technology requirements, their understandings of current research with its inherent need for change and the demand to develop the seemingly endless number of new skills needed to keep pace in their rapidly changing teaching environment.

The number of participants, all of whom had attended the REAL program at various times during the previous two year period, represents only a small sample of the early childhood teacher population of the NT. Several reasons are suggested for such a small sample number. Reasons, related to the minimal response to the invitation to participate, are conjecture only, but some possibilities include:

- Busy program and associated time constraints take priority over email response, especially for many teachers who admitted to not regularly opening or reading daily electronic mail directed to them
- Teachers consider an interview to be inconvenient and time-consuming and therefore immediately dismissed the invitation to participate in this study
- Teachers who had participated in REAL professional development program in previous years no longer considered its relevance and had possibly forgotten or discontinued using its content
- Although detailed Research Information and Consent to Participate in the Research Project forms were made available, in which confidentiality of all interview transcript issues were clearly stated, several teachers preferred not to become involved in this study
Teachers are struggling with the *Age of Entry* policy’s introduction in anger, resentment or exhaustion and therefore do not wish, by association, to be involved with matters relating to *REAL*.

There is now a need to conduct a larger, longitudinal study of early childhood practitioners across the NT to gain a greater depth of understanding of the problems and possibilities entailed in the introduction and associated training of the early *Age of Entry* policy. This longitudinal study sample should include both policy makers and practitioners. Its participants should represent a variety of age, gender, early childhood pedagogy experience and qualifications, professional development and research status.

A second recommendation is to conduct a survey of all NT early childhood practitioners, with a view to gather the extent of teacher insights into the three theoretical propositions named in this study. Such a survey would clarify the depth and breadth of the participants’ perspectives as either representative or non-representative of the total number of early childhood practitioners across the NT. The inclusion of a broader range of participants across the NT would ensure urban and non-urban settings representation, something which is not evident in the current study. Survey questions could be based on the three theoretical propositions of this study and could seek to gauge NT early childhood teachers’ agreement or disagreement with the perspectives of the initial study participants.

A third and significant recommendation is to instigate research to test the premise that an earlier age of entry into Preschool and Transition class settings:

- leads to long term improvement in young children’s emotional, social, physical and intellectual wellbeing
- is associated with the development of higher academic skills, especially for disadvantaged children
- does not adversely affect young children’s social behaviour.

Such empirical data is currently not available.

A final recommendation advocates that teachers consistently interrogate their own professional practice, through ongoing research and training. A willingness to be
involved in personal professional research could establish and facilitate teacher participation in future DEET (NT) policy development and would thereby assist early childhood teachers to more readily accept the possibility or necessity of policy and pedagogy change. It is suggested here that teacher involvement in continued research is likely to encourage positive teacher mindsets toward the endeavours of DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division policy makers, forging a process of mutual respect and assisting in some way to achieve pedagogical shifts through ongoing collaboration.

8.7 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This study set out to find the extent to which content-specific professional development learning assisted teachers in NT early childhood settings to make shifts in their personal, professional and pedagogical practice, thereby enabling them to confront and manage change in an era of rapidly reconstituting family values and social change. The study is positioned in terms of early childhood school teachers’ perspectives, encompassing what these teachers think, believe, predict, conceptualise and evaluate with regard to the value of a specified professional development training program and the resulting actions, orientations, dispositions and attitudes they adopt. It is guided by the question:

What are the perspectives of early childhood teachers on their teaching practice, in ways commensurate with recent professional development course outcomes of creating effective learning environments of the future?

Data collected from a representative number of early childhood teachers, through face-to-face interviews, identified recurring themes, issues and concerns, from which five sub-theoretical propositions were formulated. These sub-theoretical propositions were then embedded into three main interrelated theoretical propositions representing the key perspectives of early years’ teachers regarding their teaching practice, in ways commensurate with recent professional development training. These three theoretical propositions are:

*Theoretical Proposition One Statement*

Teachers in early childhood settings approve in principle of a single Age of Entry [into school] policy, with its associated REAL professional development training program, but identify feelings of apprehension and resentment towards the policy being
inclusive of an early Age of Entry [into school] and toward the lack of organisational support provided to implement this policy.

Theoretical Proposition Two Statement
Teachers in early childhood settings acknowledge that rapid social and generational classroom changes pose personal and pedagogical constraints, which influence their conceptual interpretation of the term best practice, an interpretation that appears to be at odds with REAL professional development program organisers.

Theoretical Proposition Three Statement
Teachers in early childhood settings deem their particular circumstances to influence both their perception of future schooling and their level of commitment to being pedagogy change agents.

This study makes recommendations related to policy introduction and teacher pedagogy and practice. It also makes suggestions for further investigation and research.

The recommendations related to policy include:
- The necessity for all DEET (NT) policy development to be grounded in research reviews
- The inclusion of a greater number of early childhood practitioners in policy design and development
- The recognition of the collective expertise of NT early childhood practitioners
- The necessity for collaborative sharing between DEET (NT) policy makers and early childhood teachers
- The need for continued consultation between all Australian states and territories to develop nationally agreed single age of entry into school.

The recommendations with regard to pedagogy and practice include:
- Regular, ongoing professional sharing between DEET (NT) policy makers and school-based staff
- The provision of opportunities for early childhood teachers to demonstrate best practice
- A review of the effectiveness of the *Age of Entry* policy and the suitability of the *REAL* professional development program to adequately train early childhood teachers
- The need for greater collaboration between DEET (NT) policy makers and early childhood teachers in the sharing of experiences, expertise and resources
- The provision of research inquiry opportunities for early childhood teachers
- The collaborative organisation of future professional development programs
- A move from traditional to contemporary professional development agendas
- The allocation of funding that is targeted for early years programs
- An increased involvement of school principals, staff and the community to support new policy implementation
- A review of early childhood teacher and care giver pedagogy to develop consistency in the implementation of early childhood programs in the NT

The recommendations for research include:

- The need to conduct a larger, longitudinal study to gain greater understandings related to the introduction of the *Age of Entry* policy
- The conduction of a survey to test and gather the extent of the participant perspectives formulated in the theoretical propositions of this study
- The initiation of a longitudinal study to test the suggestion that an earlier age of entry into school program leads to long term improvement in young children’s emotional, social, physical and intellectual well being.

Working collaboratively, it is possible for early childhood teachers and DEET (NT) Curriculum Services Division policy makers, who currently direct early childhood curriculum initiatives to create their own *strong beginnings*, a unified source and facilitator of change in the contemporary local and national early childhood education agenda. When early childhood teachers confidently respond to professional development training opportunities to establish safe, experience-rich, loving, nurturing early childhood learning programs which establish firm bases for growth of confident, competent and contributing young children, Angelica’s question will be suitably answered and her dream fulfilled.
REFERENCES

*Educational Leadership*. Vol. 52, No 8, retrieved April, 2001 from 
http://www.21learn.org

Routledge.

Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) (2007, January 23) 7.30 Report, 
retrieved from www.abc.net.au/7.30:p2

for Australian Education* Canberra, ACT: Australian Education Union

Australian Education Union. (2004). Educational Leadership and Teaching for the 
Twenty First Century. Project Discussion Paper, retrieved June 2004 from 
www.aeufederal.org.au

Bartlett, K. (2007). Everyone included, everyone challenged, everyone successful: 
184, pp. 44-49.


Routledge.


Open University Press.

Helm.


Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

April 28, from www.cdharris.net/text/blumer.html


Smith, D. J. (2006). *If the world were a village*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin.


Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory (2006) review of the teacher professional standards project, retrieved October 10, from www.trb.nt.gov.au


GLOSSARY

**Age of Entry Trial** – A trial period of flexible intake for Preschools, developed by the Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training Curriculum Services Division organisers to ensure that Northern Territory schools were on track with respect to the Australian Federal Government’s requirements for all states and territories to move to a nationally consistent single intake into school policy by the year 2010. The trial involved:

- Children who turn five on or by 30 June may begin in Transition at the beginning of Term 1 of the given year
- Children who turn four on or by 30 June may begin in Preschool at the beginning of Term 1 of the given year.

**ACDE** – Australian Council of Deans of Education

**AEU** – Australian Education Union

**Best Practice** – quality teaching and learning practice referred to by authors of *Strong Beginnings* document as quality practice pedagogy in early childhood education programs.

**Department of Employment, Education and Training, Northern Territory (DEET, NT)** – the Northern Territory Government appointed body overseeing education across the Northern Territory. In October, 2008 this education body was reviewed and renamed **Department of Education and Training (DET)**.

**Education Advisory Council (EAC)** – 2003 consultation group, comprising school principals, school councils, early childhood educators, professional organisations, parents and school communities across the Northern Territory, which was formed to review Preschool and Transition enrolment.

**Early Years Framework (EYF)** – a Department of Employment, Education and Training, Northern Territory cross-sector guide for action, designed for the programming and planning of quality care and learning experiences for children 0-8 years of age.

**Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)** – a policy concerned with providing education and care to young children. This policy is also linked with issues of women’s employment and equality of opportunity.
Information and Communication Technology (ICT) – terminology used in school office and home settings for the wide range of electronic devices that enable learners to obtain and interpret new visual and aural information through instantaneous local and global communication.

International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) - Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Level 0 programme addressing the development of a child’s natural learning strategies through play, exploration of the outdoors, freedom of movement and relations with other children.

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – a forum in which the governments of thirty democracies work together to address the economic, social and environmental challenges of globalisation. The OECD provides a setting where governments can compare policy experiences, seek answers to common problems, identify good practice and work to co-ordinate domestic and international policies.

Play-based learning – programmed learning in which play is advocated as the focal means for children to gain knowledge.

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – program organised through OECD to survey reading, mathematical and scientific literacy levels of fifteen year old students. This survey is conducted every three years.

REAL - acronym for Relationships and Partnerships, Environments, Active Learning Approach and Language Development, which describe the types of relevant and meaningful activities offered by early childhood educators to cater for young learners’ needs.


Strong Beginnings – an explicit guide to quality practice for Preschool and Transition class in the Northern Territory, designed to guide and support quality practice for children three to five years of age.
APPENDIX 1

REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers

Professional Development Course offered to Early Years Teachers, NT

March 21 – 23, 2006

Developers
Curriculum Services Division officers

Outcomes
- Identify and develop common understandings about the skills, processes and advantages of building strong relationships and partnerships
- Identify and develop common understandings about the skills, processes and advantages of creating effective and high-achieving learning environments
- Explore pathways of individual research and learning to optimise relationships and partnerships in own work context
- Use own learning preferences and meta-cognitive processes to optimise own learning (Inner Learner 1)

Day 1 – Exploring Relationships and Partnerships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:30 – 10:00</td>
<td>• Introduction: PD Outcomes for Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Action Learning Journal – Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tips and Tools – ICT Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00 – 10:30</td>
<td>Morning Tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 – 12:30</td>
<td>• Skills for the 21st Century / Ideal Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Best Practice Characteristics of Relationships and Partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30 – 1:30</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30 – 4:00</td>
<td>• Scope and impact / importance of relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Overview of Strong Beginnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reflection and conclusion Day 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Day 2 – Building effective Relationships / Partnerships and Creating Quality Environments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:30 – 12:00</td>
<td>• Introduction: PD Outcomes for Day 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School visits. <strong>Morning Tea</strong> at individual schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00 – 1:00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00 – 4:00</td>
<td>• Debrief – School visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Partnerships Panel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reflection and conclusion Day 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Day 3 – Creating Quality Environments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 8:30 – 10:30 | • Introduction: PD Outcomes for Day 3  
|           | • Exploring Quality Environments                                            |
|           | • Types and characteristics of Quality Environments                          |
| 10:30 – 11:00 | Morning Tea                                                                  |
| 11:00 – 1:00 | Guest Speakers                                                               |
|           | • Greening Australia                                                          |
|           | • Occupational Health and Safety – Australian Playground Standards           |
| 1:00 – 2:00 | Lunch                                                                         |
| 2:00 – 4:00 | • Creating Quality Environments                                             |
|           | • Burning Issues – Question Time (Round Robin)                               |
|           | • Conclusion and Evaluation of 3 day PD                                       |

With Compliments

Northern Territory Government

Department of Employment, Education and Training

Further note to participants:

Please find enclosed pre-reading for the REAL PD workshop along with the CDU (Charles Darwin University) map with venue building highlighted.
APPENDIX 2

REAL Learning for Early Years Teachers

Further Professional Development Course offered to Early Years Teachers
May 9 – 11, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developers</th>
<th>Curriculum Services Division officers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>o Identify and develop common understandings about the skills, processes and advantages of Active Learning and Language in the Early Years classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Explore pathways of creating environments to optimise Active Learning and Language Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Explore pathways to early literacy and language relationships and partnerships in own work context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Explore and experiment with exciting hands on physical activities to get young learners moving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Explore techniques of Brain Gym to help young learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Use own learning preferences and meta-cognitive processes to optimise own learning (Inner Learner 1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Day 1 – Exploring active Learning Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:30 – 10:30</td>
<td>• Tea / Coffee / Registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Welcome and Housekeeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Introduction: PD Overview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Action Learning Journal – Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Outcomes of Day 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Exploring Learning Theories, Approaches and Frameworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 – 11:00</td>
<td>Morning Tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00 – 12.30</td>
<td>• Myth Busters – Play Base Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30 – 1:15</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:15 – 4:00</td>
<td>• Personal Sharing – Real classrooms - participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Physical Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Summary of Day 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Agenda and Outcomes of Day 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Day 2 – Rich Active Learning Environments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:30 – 12:30</td>
<td>• School visits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Morning Tea at individual schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Session Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30 – 1:15</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:15 – 4:15</td>
<td>• Debrief (2 school groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Exploring ICT in the Early Childhood Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Personal Sharing – Real Classrooms - Participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Day 3 – Catering for Quality Learning Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:15 – 10:30</td>
<td>• Input on Language Development and Site Based links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Brain Gym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 – 11:00</td>
<td>Morning Tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00 – 1:00</td>
<td>• Language Encounters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00 – 1:45</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:45 – 4:00</td>
<td>• Let’s Talk Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conclusion and Evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>