
EXAMINING FOCUSED CONVERSATION FOR LEADING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: HIGHLIGHTING THE ROLE OF EVALUATIVE STANCE

Di Nailon, Damon Thomas, Sherridan Emery, Elspeth Stephenson, Virginia Kinnear
University of Tasmania, Launceston

Abstract

Focused conversation is an approach used to lead group inquiry into topics of concern or interest. Four levels of questions guide participants through objective, reflective, interpretive and decisional levels of conversation. Over the past several years focused conversation was adopted in Australia to facilitate National Quality Framework related professional learning and development with early childhood educators. The research reported here used an attitude analysis from Systemic Functional Linguistics to examine the role of evaluative stance in a facilitated focused conversation with a coordination team in a Family Day Care Service. The analysis targeted the reflective and interpretive levels of a focused conversation around the use of television with young children in home based care. These levels are designed to encourage the expression of personal feelings about, and evaluation of an issue. The analysis showed that the coordination team members moved from negative discussions to a more positive systems-oriented approach to solving issues surrounding the topic. Outcomes of the study have the potential to contribute to the use of focused conversation in leading communities of practice in early childhood and other sectors of education.

Introduction

Major changes in early childhood policy in Australia since 2009 have necessitated considerable professional learning and development (PL&D) in the sector (Nailon, 2013). Much of the PL&D has been focused on enacting the principles and strategies related to improving the quality of education and care provided to children from birth to five years in a range of early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings including Family Day Care. There is an increasing need for educational leadership to introduce the policy changes and facilitate the content and process learning required by a diverse and changing workforce holding competing philosophies (The Boston Consulting Group, 2008; Raban et al., 2007). In 2009, a guide to PL&D was produced and distributed to the ECEC sector to inform a range of quality PL&D activities around the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Russell, 2009). The strategies and principles introduced in the guide reflect those more recently produced in a draft charter for professional development of teachers and school leaders (AITSL, 2011). These include PL&D relevance, collaborative learning, futures focus and sustained performance. It is important to note that Russell's (2009) focus on relational, reflective professional conversations align with other NQF publications (DEEWR, 2010) and provide consistent messages for the field regarding recommended PL&D strategies.

Establishing learning communities was highlighted by Russell (2009) as key to bringing about changes in professional practice that are observable and goal-oriented. This paper reports on one such learning community in a Family Day Care Service (FDCS) where a research study examined the group members' interactions during a facilitated PL&D session. Members of the coordination team in the FDCS participated in a series of three PL&D sessions which required them to meet together at intervals to discuss a topic of interest decided by the group. Between sessions the group members engaged in agreed targeted action to reflect on at their next meeting. Several coordination team members were responsible for supporting individual educators who cared for up to five children from birth to five years in their homes, and these team members reported on their interaction with educators

around the topic. The sessions were facilitated by one of the authors of this paper and adopted the focused conversation approach (Stanfield, 2000) to lead the discussions. The focused conversation for each session was developed around questions that addressed the use (or mis-use) of television in the education and care of young children in home-based care at that FDCS. A linguistic tool of analysis from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) was selected to identify the conversational changes that occurred in an attempt to understand how focused conversation has the potential to generate levels of critical reflection through relational inquiry. This paper outlines the theoretical background to the study and provides an overview of the conversational changes that occurred through the lens of SFL.

Leading Communities of Practice

Due to the growth of accountability measures introduced by Governments and endorsed by parents, the ECEC field in Australia and internationally face continued challenges to professionalise workers (Rodd, 2006; Logan, Press & Sumsion, 2012). The term 'educator' was introduced in Australia to reflect the professionalisation of the field, and responds to the call by Menmuir and Hughes (2004) and others (OECD, 2006) to frame the ECEC role and background typologies with a single term. The leadership challenge in early childhood settings is to use the strengths of a diverse group of people to create what Buysse, Sparkman and Wesley (2003) call a Community of Practice (CoP). Some argue that this requires the adoption of transformational leadership to generate a 'climate of continuous learning' where learning is 'routinely shared with others' (Hallinger, 2003, p. 338). Wenger (2000) describes CoPs as groups of people who share a passion about a mutual interest and interact regularly to build their knowledge, understanding and expertise. They have the opportunity to examine common issues, pose questions, offer advice and solve problems together. In this way, they accumulate knowledge and become bound by the value they find in learning together (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

In a CoP, learning is understood as a social process, and according to Wenger (2000) forges the development of a 'social learning system' (p. 229). Each member brings his or her own experiences and knowledge to the group and through interaction explores and reflects on how personal experience and knowledge impact on practice. Dynamic relationships are established by focusing on collaborative meaning-making through dialogue. To contribute to a CoP, members need to mutually engage in interactions through a shared repertoire of resources such as language, and be bound together by an agreed understanding of what their community is about (Wenger, 2000). Here professional practice is improved as questions are collectively raised and new conceptions explored (Little, 2002). Little suggests that if CoPs facilitate professional learning, then such learning should be evident in their ongoing encounters. When ECEC educators form professional learning communities to examine their practice in deeply personal and collective ways they have an opportunity to engage in transformative learning.

The educational leader in an ECEC service plays a pivotal role in identifying and confirming the community context of the CoP (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007), and in consolidating and affirming group membership. Heikka & Waniganayake (2011) propose that the educational leader has responsibility for leading the education and care of children by developing the expertise of staff and personally providing a high level of pedagogical and curriculum expertise. While leadership for learning, according to Siraj-Blatchford & Manni (2007), requires effective communication and collaboration (p. 12), how educational leaders can best facilitate transformative learning has not been fully explored in the ECEC research literature. Little (2002) argues that studies of collegial groups demonstrate a developmental trajectory 'specifically with regard to their capacity and disposition to dig deeply into matters of practice' (p. 945). There is a paucity of research examining the interactions and dynamics that occur in CoPs, or in the strategies that support the facilitation of collaborative meaning-making.

Transformative Leadership through Focused Conversations

In recent times transformational leadership has been identified as being necessary for meeting the changes required by the National Quality Framework (NQF) due, in part, to the ‘vulnerability’ of the workforce (Fenech, 2013, p. 90). Transformative leadership adopts some of the characteristic strategies of transformational leaders such as inspiring and valuing each member of the organisation in an attempt to build self-regard and self-confidence. However, a transformative leader adds to the transformational repertoire a critical stance which adopts a political dimension. Transformative leaders do this by engaging in discussions that examine a range of contextual issues and their impacts on practice (Bottery, 2001, p. 216). Shields builds on Friere’s (1998, cited in Shields, 2010) assertion that education can become a lever for social transformation and contends that transformative leadership raises questions of justice and democracy (p. 559). The role then of a transformative leader according to Shields is to offer an inclusive, equitable and deeply democratic conception of education.

The importance of conversation and language in the process of empowerment, transformation and change cannot be overstated. Freire (2000) writes ‘to exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it’ (p. 88). He emphasises language and dialogue as being fundamental to people being able to liberate themselves from the oppressive state of a compliance mentality through transformation. Loucks-Horsley, Stiles, Mundry, Love and Hewson (2010) advocate professional learning strategies that engage educators in challenging deeply held beliefs, knowledge, and habits of practice. According to Mezirow (1991), the process of transformation involves revising perspectives through processes of critical reflection. He adds that this requires educators to actively engage with the concepts presented in the context of their own lives through identifying and examining their own assumptions and values. We suggest that the transformative ideals raised by Mezirow reflect those of the focused conversation approach.

Focused conversation is an approach originally developed by Stanfield (2000) designed to create a shared repertoire of language and meaning-making. Stanfield’s model provides for ‘good conversation where ideas are laid down beside each other... and from which there is... a genuine exploration of the subject from which conclusions and decisions may then be made’ (p. 9). There is, he says, a need for real participation in order to develop a learning community where people constantly use their insights to create a ‘transformed personal style’ (p. 13). Stanfield argues that a facilitator has the capacity to ask questions designed to move beyond the surface level of a topic and elicit responses that will have implications for an individual’s life and work (p. 17). Focused conversations are structured to guide participants through the process of critical reflection by taking them in an organised way through a series of levels of thinking. Initially, questions relate to the objective and reflective levels, and then on to the more critically focused interpretive and decisional levels. The potential exists for participants to alter their frames of reference, that is, to challenge the assumptions through which experiences are understood. Mezirow (1991) argues such critical reflection can lead to paradigmatic and behavioural shifts. Focused conversations are structured to facilitate such shifts.

Conversational models of learning have been used for some time (Senge, 1990; Tan & Brown, 2005). More recently they have been adopted for PL&D in ECEC in Australia by integrating the use of Stanfield’s (2000) focused conversation approach. Cartmel, Macfarlane and Casley (2012) refer to focused conversation in their description of the circles of change model developed for PL&D around the NQF. A more direct use of focused conversation is outlined in the professional conversation approach used by Irvine and Price (2011) in their NQF related PL&D sessions. Irvine and Collie (2011) suggest that the use of pre-planned questions based on Stanfield’s four levels ‘nurtured secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships and collaboration between group members’ (p. 7). Using the four levels, they argue, supports participation, deep thinking, sustained learning and change in professional practice. Irvine and Price (2011) note that the role of the facilitator, or in their terms the skilled enabler, is to ‘draw out the wisdom of the group’ (p. 155). They found that alongside other outcomes, professional conversations led to strengthened capacity for reflection, and strengthened capacity to use and promote the language of the EYLF. We suggest that by examining the dialogue

prompted by focused conversation questions we might identify the shifts in the resource of language that contribute to the strengthened capacities identified by Irvine and Price.

Examining focused conversation through Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a useful strategy for analysing the content of professional conversations. According to SFL, language use is always connected with social functions (Halliday & Hasan, 1993). While other theories consider the use of language as a cognitive process, SFL presents language as a tool used to achieve social purposes. It can be argued that the four distinct levels in focused conversation each require specific uses of language to achieve social purposes and therefore can be examined through an SFL lens. The objective level of focused conversation relies upon language to outline the issue; the reflective level to express the emotions involved; the interpretive level to unpack the significance of the issue; and the decisional level to explain how the issue might be resolved. SFL offers numerous analytical systems concerned with understanding possible meanings that can be made in any context (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The interpersonal metafunction of SFL offers a useful analytical system to identify how people interact, reflect on, interpret and address professional issues.

According to Martin and White (2005), interpersonal resources focus on how people negotiate social relations. It is concerned with how they interact, including how they share their feelings (p. 7). Such functions are central to focused conversations, particularly so for the reflective level, where participants are asked to express feelings about the issue. Within the interpersonal metafunction lies the systems of APPRAISAL, which comprises linguistic resources used to present evaluative language and emotive responses in texts (Martin & White, 2005; White, 2003). APPRAISAL is itself split into three interacting domains. One of these, known as ATTITUDE¹ is concerned with expressing feelings, making judgements and evaluating non-human phenomena (Martin & White, 2005), all of which are vital aspects of the reflective and interpretive levels of focused conversations. Martin and White (2005) outlined three primary domains that make up the ATTITUDE system. The domains include AFFECT concerning the expression of emotions, JUDGEMENT dealing with the assessment of human behaviour, and APPRECIATION involving the evaluation of non-human phenomena. The ATTITUDE system of APPRAISAL is represented here as a system network (Figure 1). This shows the linguistic resources which form subsystems of AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION.

¹ Within the SFL tradition, certain wordings are capitalised to avoid confusion with the regular meaning of the words.

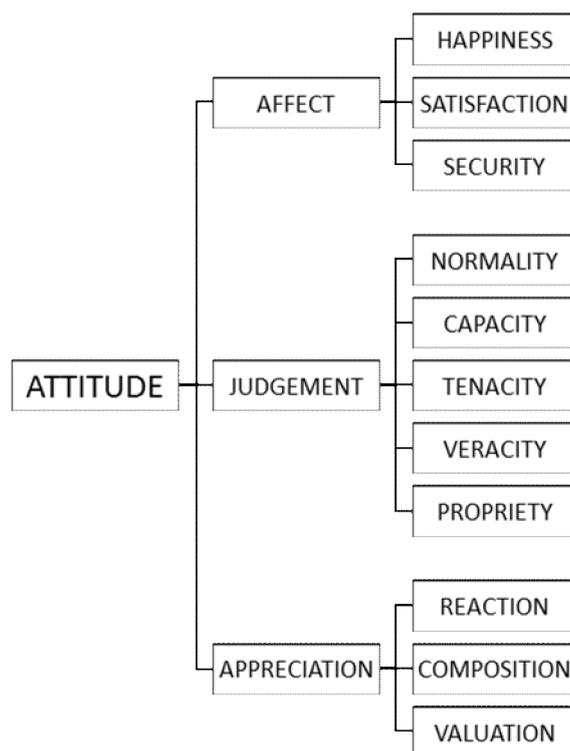


Figure 1. The attitude system (adapted from Martin & White, 2005)

Attitudinal meanings tend to ‘spread out and colour a phase of discourse as speakers and writers take up a stance oriented to affect, judgement or appreciation’ (Martin & White, 2005, p. 43). This phenomena is known as *prosody*, and can provide insight into beliefs and world views that in turn offer possibilities for transformative change. The ATTITUDE system of APPRAISAL therefore has the potential to highlight the role of evaluative stance in the dialogue that occurs during a focused conversation session which might be associated with transformative change.

The research study

The research reported here trialled the application of the focused conversation PL&D approach with a selected group of early childhood educators. Five members of a FDCS coordination team from a regional city in Tasmania participated in three facilitator-led PL&D sessions held at fortnightly intervals. The first session outlined the focused conversation approach and considered the topic selection for reflective discussion during sessions two and three. Session two was designed to explore the topic, and create a series of field-based action research activities with home-based educators. In session three participants reported on outcomes from the field-based activity and made recommendations for future action. The facilitator generated a series of questions aligned with each of the focused conversation levels prior to each session. The questions revolved around the topic identified as being of most interest to the group, namely, how television was used by home-based educators during the time they spent with young children in care. During each session, the questions were used loosely as a frame of reference for the facilitator. According to Stanfield (2000), questions can be modified during the conversation to keep the group focused on the meanings being created at the time (p. 37).

The focused conversation approach is regarded by Stanfield (2000) as a ‘whole-system process’ to structure conversations (p. 24). However, he pays particular importance to levels two (reflective) and three (interpretive). The reflective level evokes memory, intuition, emotion and imagination. The

interpretive level highlights the layers of meaning and purpose associated with a topic. Stanfield suggests it is these levels that are often found to be most difficult in terms of generating questions in the planning phase. Also, these levels offer critical impact in terms of ensuring that the conversation ‘imbues what is outside the self with feeling and meaning,’ and ‘brings to the surface emotions and insights which normally would not see the light of day’ (p. 24). The insights surfaced at the reflective and interpretive levels draw out implications, decisions and next steps for moving toward the final decisional level of the conversation.

As argued earlier, reflective and interpretive levels of focused conversation can be analysed using the conventions of the SFL system of APPRAISAL as a tool to identify evaluative language and emotive responses. Group members’ responses to questions in the reflective and interpretive levels during session two of the PL&D were analysed in this way. With De Wever, Schellens, Valcke and Van Keer’s (2006) cautions about rater reliability in mind, an initial analysis of one part of the transcript was undertaken by the research team members and results compared and discussed to align our interpretations of the language used by participants. The facilitator of the focused conversation was present during the analysis process to confirm whether certain evoked (Martin & White, 2005), or indirect meanings were being read in the context of the PD session. Although these precautions were taken, it is possible that some subjectivity still remained. This is recognised as a necessary limitation of the study.

Results

In the second PL&D session held with the coordination team from the FDCS, focused conversation questions raised at the objective level identified what participants knew about the use of television and young children. Outcomes from the objective level informed the responsive framing of the reflective and interpretive level questions. In order to prompt a transition to the reflective level, the facilitator asked participants how they felt about educators having a television on for long periods each day when caring for children in their homes. This began the discussion that was transcribed and analysed for any instances of attitudinal resources. Appendix 1 lists the series of questions generated prior to session two. These were adapted during the session to suit the flow of the conversation. Appendix 2 provides a brief excerpt from the transcript, along with how the excerpt was analysed using the SFL ATTITUDE analysis conventions.

Of the 11 base level attitudinal resources listed earlier in Figure 1, the conversation that occurred at the reflective and interpretive levels featured nine of these resources. These are outlined in Tables 1, 2 and 3 below with examples from the conversation. Each of the tables adopts the SFL convention of listing the attitudinal *resource*, the *appraiser* - the participant who is using the resource in the conversation, and the *appraisal*, which extracts from the transcript the words used that have been interpreted by the research team as an example of the resource. Findings concerned with the three ATTITUDE sub-systems of AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION are described in turn.

The resources of AFFECT are broadly concerned with expressing emotions: happiness involves ‘the moods of feeling happy or sad, and the possibility of directing these feelings at a trigger by liking or disliking it’ (Martin & White, 2005, p. 49); satisfaction deals with ‘feelings of achievement and frustration in relation to the activities in which we are engaged’ (Martin & White, 2005, p. 50); and security covers ‘feelings of peace and anxiety in relation to our environs’ (Martin & White, 2005, p. 49). Examples of each resource of AFFECT from the focused conversation can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 – Examples of AFFECT resources from the focused conversation

Resource	Appraiser	Appraisal (positive or negative comment related to resource)
happiness	Andrea	It's something I've identified in me... that I <u>can't stand</u> TV.
satisfaction	Andrea	I've often felt... I felt <u>disappointed</u> for the children with the TV on...

		I felt <u>disappointed</u> for what they are missing out on.
security	Jill	And she said, well I actually... I'm <u>used to</u> some noise or music in the background.

Resources of AFFECT were the least commonly used of the three attitude subsystems in the conversation. There were eight uses overall: three uses of SATISFACTION (one positive, two negative); four uses of SECURITY (two positive, two negative); and one use of HAPPINESS (one negative). In summary, the most common uses of positive AFFECT related to being confident or secure (SECURITY), while the most common uses of negative AFFECT related to feeling dissatisfied with the situation at hand (SATISFACTION).

Following AFFECT, the resources of JUDGEMENT are broadly concerned with judging human qualities or behaviours, and the focused conversation featured use of the resources of CAPACITY, TENACITY and PROPRIETY. CAPACITY concerns how capable a person is, and can be realised indirectly by describing situations where a person's capacity to complete a task is enhanced or hindered (Martin & White, 2005). TENACITY concerns how dependable or adaptable a person is, while PROPRIETY concerns how ethically a person acts (Martin & White, 2005). Examples of JUDGEMENT resources can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2 – Examples of JUDGEMENT resources from the focused conversation

Resource	Appraiser	Appraisal (positive or negative comment related to resource)
capacity	Barbara	We can use [the policy] to <u>our benefit</u> and to <u>the benefit of the children</u> .
tenacity	Andrea	But I need to, I think be a bit ah... <u>flexible</u> , because that's not everybody's standpoint.
propriety	Jill	I mean if I go at quiet time, the TV is on when children are resting, but outside of that, say <u>if it's about 10 o'clock, it is off</u> .

Resources of JUDGEMENT were more common in the conversation than resources of AFFECT. There were 22 uses overall, including ten uses of CAPACITY (three positive, seven negative), nine uses of PROPRIETY (seven positive, two negative), and three uses of TENACITY (all positive). In the use of these resources, the most common negative judgements were of people who are not able to operate effectively because of television or a lack of policy guidelines. The most common positive judgements were of people who do what is ethically right – namely using the host organisation's policy documents to make better judgements in the workplace.

Finally, the resources of APPRECIATION that featured in the focused conversation were REACTION and VALUATION. REACTION evaluates things as being impactful (e.g. did it engage/captivate/fascinate me or not?), or being likable (e.g. did I find it appealing/beautiful/lovely or not?) (Martin & White, 2005). VALUATION evaluates things as being valuable (e.g. was it worthwhile/effective/innovative or not?) (Martin & White, 2005). Examples of these resources from the focused conversation can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3 – Examples of APPRECIATION resources from the focused conversation

Resource	Appraiser	Appraisal
reaction	Kate	It's just background and that lifts the noise level of the group, so it has an impact.

valuation	Jill	Oh that's a <u>good</u> idea, she said.
-----------	------	---

There was an equal number of APPRECIATION and JUDGEMENT resources in the focused conversation overall (22), with APPRECIATION made up by 19 VALUATIONS (ten positive, nine negative) and three REACTIONS (all negative). The participants commonly used APPRECIATION to positively evaluate the organisations policy for what this allows practitioners to do, while they negatively evaluated problems caused by television in professional settings.

Figure 2 indicates the spread of attitudinal resources across the focused conversation. It shows how the dialogue began with much negativity towards television (VALUATION/REACTION), accompanied by some judgements of people who are negatively affected by it (CAPACITY).

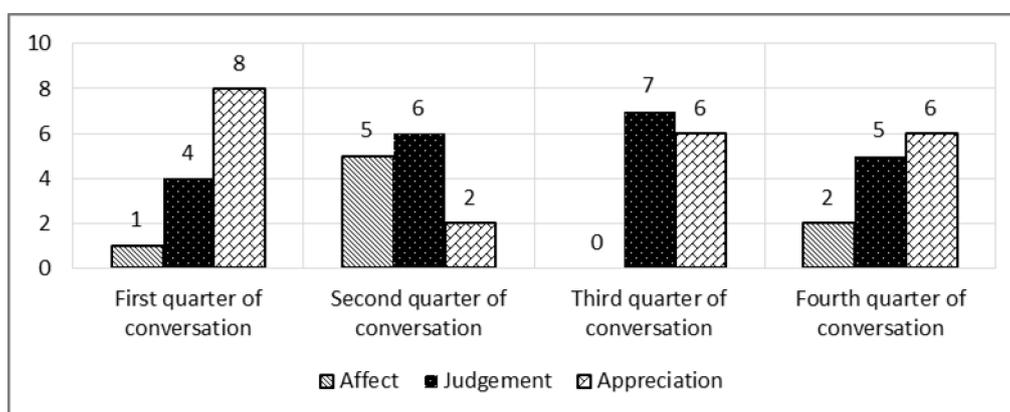


Figure 2. ATTITUDINAL resources by category across the focused conversation

The second quarter largely remained negative, yet shifted the main focus from television to feelings of disappointment about the impact on children (SATISFACTION/CAPACITY), and started a dialogue about what constitutes effective practice in making judgements and taking action (PROPRIETY/TENACITY). This continued into the third quarter, where positive evaluations were made about the organisation's policy, in how it empowers practitioners to make better judgements (PROPRIETY/VALUATION) that in turn benefit children and adults (CAPACITY/VALUATION). The final quarter continued the flow of positive evaluations with a focus on changes that can be made by using the policy (VALUATION/PROPRIETY), accompanied by positive judgements of people using the policy in this way (PROPRIETY).

Figure 3 indicates how the conversation began with much negative evaluative language, yet this use decreased rapidly as the conversation developed. Conversely, there was very little positive language used by participants at first, yet as the conversation continued, their use of language shifted from the negative to the positive.

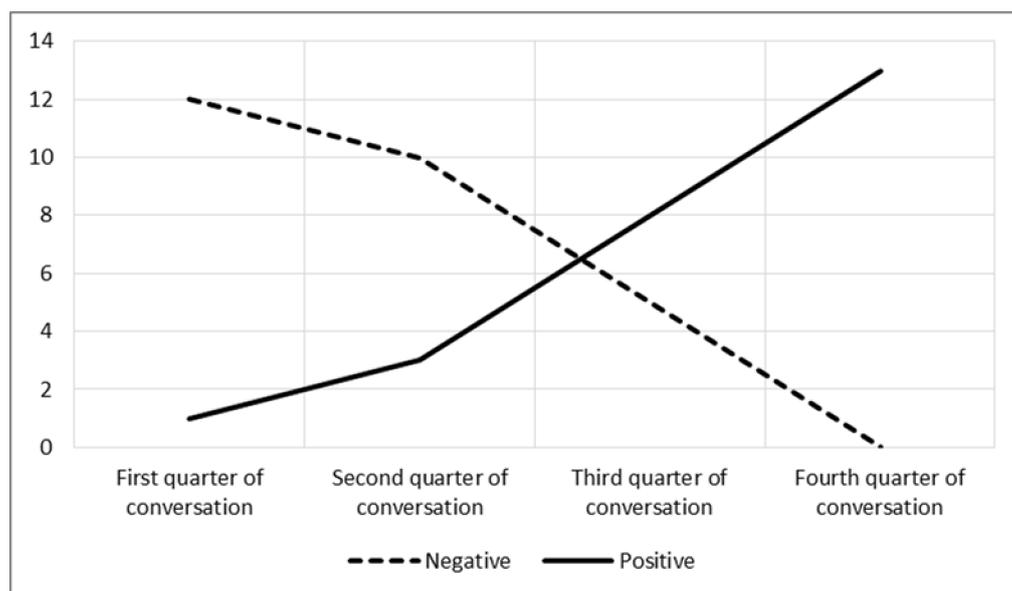


Figure 3. Positive and negative attitudinal resources across the focused conversation

While the conversation began with participants sharing what they felt was problematic with the issue, it concluded on a positive note focusing on opportunities provided by the organisation's policy documents.

Discussion: Using ATTITUDE analysis in focused conversation

The ATTITUDE analysis undertaken in this study demonstrates how evaluative language was a central element of the reflective and interpretive levels of one focused conversation. It shows how the conversation developed from a main focus on the negative aspects of television, through to the opportunities made possible by the host organisation's policy documents. The analysis highlights the power of focused conversation to shift participants' thinking from negative issues to positive solutions. The ATTITUDE analysis revealed that the participants were somewhat like-minded in both their negative and positive comments at the reflective and interpretive levels. As individuals however, they used their evaluative language differently. Some individuals drew personal inferences while other focused on the characteristic behaviour of the home-based educators.

Based on the evaluative language evident in the conversation held at the reflective and interpretive levels of the focused conversation, we suggest that there is benefit to be gained from using the ATTITUDE system to develop questions for these levels. Creating questions for these levels is a process traditionally described as problematic for facilitators (Stanfield, 2000). Questions based on the ATTITUDE system would encompass the use of the three subsystems of AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION to enhance the likelihood of uncovering participants' deep feelings and judgements around an issue. This, we suggest, is imperative for transformative learning. Facilitators who understand the three sub-systems can devise sets of questions appropriate to a given context. Depending on the issue, facilitators may focus more attention on questions that relate to particular subsystems. A general understanding of how the three subsystems function would allow facilitators to adjust their questioning throughout a conversation to assist participants to reach the heart of the issue effectively. For the present study, the ATTITUDE analysis demonstrates how participants drew from the three subsystems at different times, with most resources drawn from JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION. This was not unexpected, as the theme of the focused conversation involved television use in home-based ECEC settings (i.e. how a non-human phenomenon related to human behaviour). It would be worth including aspects of the three subsystems in predefined question sets, as important insights may arise that might otherwise be missed. If meaningful insights are surfaced at the reflective and

interpretive levels, this would empower participants to make more effective decisions at the final level of the conversation. This process requires further study to determine its effectiveness in practice especially regarding its contribution to transformative change. Our findings highlight how educational leaders might make use of focused conversation to lead the learning required to enact change in response to the introduction of policies such as the NQF.

Conclusion: The value of focused conversation in ECEC educational leadership

The focused conversation conducted with the team of FDC coordinators adopted the characteristics of a Community of Practice (CoP). McMillan and colleagues (2012) suggest that an interactive, collaborative network of like-minded professionals form the ‘right’ conditions for the development of a CoP (p.406). Here, they say, is where individuals have the opportunity to develop and learn. ECEC practitioners need to engage in critical reflection based on understanding the beliefs, assumptions, and multiple perspectives within the field (DEEWR, 2010). While they have shared passions or interests, practitioners bring their own experiences and their own perspectives to decision-making and action with young children and families. The results of the attitude analysis undertaken in this study illustrate the variation in perspectives about an issue of concern for the FDCS coordination team. It also shows that by engaging in the conversation, participants were able to find agreed understandings about the issue. It appears that the focused conversation approach provided a way for the facilitator to create safe ground for the participants to engage in a personal and collaborative reflective process. Linder (2011) argues that a facilitator’s role in professional development is critical, and describes several characteristics that are required for success, including the ability to problematise practice, and modify experiences to suit participants’ contexts (p. 48).

In this study, the focused conversation format assisted the facilitator to generate a series of questions that offered potential for critical reflection. The format also provided the capability to modify the conversation to suit the context of the PL&D and the participants’ beliefs and attitudes. Stanfield (2000) suggests that focused conversations are not as simple as going through a series of prescribed steps. A facilitator, he says, needs to be flexible and respond to the needs of the group. By keeping the four levels of focused conversation in mind, the facilitator in this study was able to make decisions about guiding the conversation so that stages weren’t missed, while also allowing for important issues to be contextualised. The power of focused conversation, according to Stanfield, is the inclusion of the emotive and interpretive aspects where beliefs and assumptions can be explored. The research discussed in this paper identified a strategy based on the SFL ATTITUDE system that provides a starting point for analysing the content of focused conversations and the shifts in ideas that are shared. It also has the potential to contribute to devising a more powerful set of questions particularly at the reflective and interpretive levels of a focused conversation. Transformative leadership in education calls for the identification and understanding of beliefs and the examination of ontological and epistemological assumptions, values, context and experience, and competing worldviews (Shields, 2006). It seems that educational leaders who are charged with facilitating educational change in the ECEC sector might consider using focused conversation which adopts an evaluative stance as a tool for looking critically at professional practice with groups of educators in their settings. In so doing, educational leaders may yet reflect the aspirations of members of the EYLF writing team who sought transformative change in the sector (Sumsion et al., 2009). Educational leaders elsewhere who are attempting to lead transformative change might also adopt the relational strategies examined in this study.

References

- AITSL. (2011). Australian charter of the professional learning of teachers and school leaders: A shared responsibility and commitment. Canberra: The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Ltd. Retrieved from:
http://www.aitsl.edu.au/verve/_resources/Draft_Charter_aitsl_2011.pdf
- Bottery, M. (2001). Globalisation and the UK competition state: No room for transformational

leadership in education?. *School Leadership and Management: Formerly School Organisation*, 21(2), 199 – 218.

- Buysse, V., Sparkman, K. L., & Wesley, P. W. (2003). Communities of practice: Connecting what we know with what we do. *Exceptional Children*, 69(3), 263-278.
- Cartmel, J., Macfarlane, K., & Casley, M. (2012). *Reflection as a tool for quality: Working with the National Quality Standard*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.
- DEEWR. (2010). *Educators belonging, being & becoming: educator's guide to the early years learning framework for Australia*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- De Wever, B., Schellens, T., Valcke, M., & Van Keer, H. (2006). Content analysis schemes to analyse transcripts of online asynchronous discussion groups: A review. *Computers and Education*, 46, 6-8.
- Fenech, S. (2013). Leadership development during times of reform. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 38(1), 89-94.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1993). *Language, context, and text: Aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective*. Victoria, Australia: Deakin University Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar* (3rd ed.). London: Hodder Education.
- Hallinger, P. (2003). Leading educational change: Reflections on the practice of instructional and transformational leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33(3), 329-352.
- Heikka, J., & Waniganayake, M. (2011). Pedagogical leadership from a distributed perspective within the context of early childhood. *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*, 14(4), 499-512.
- Irvine, S., & Collie, M. (2011). The professional conversation: A new approach to professional learning in early childhood education and care. *In the Loop, Autumn*, 3-8.
- Irvine, S. L., & Price, J. (2011). Professional conversations : A new approach to professional learning in ECEC. In Prachalias, Chrysovaladis (Ed.) *7th ICE Conference: Conference Proceedings*, INEAG, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece, Samos, Greece, 152-159.
- Linder, S. (2011). The facilitator's role in elementary mathematics professional development. *Mathematics Teacher Education and Development*, 13(2), 44-66.
- Little, J. (2002). Locating learning in teachers' communities of practice: Opening up problems of analysis in records of everyday work. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 18(8), 917-946.
- Logan, H., Press, F., & Sumsion, J. (2012). The quality imperative: Tracing the rise of 'quality' in Australian early childhood education and care policy. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 37(3), 4-13.
- Loucks-Horsley, S., Stiles, K. E., Mundry, S., Love, N., & Hewson, P. W. (2010). *Designing professional development for teachers of science and mathematics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

- Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McMillan, D. J., Walsh, G., Gray, C., Hanna, K., Carville, S., McCracken, O. (2012). Changing mindsets: The benefits of implementing a professional development model in early childhood settings in Ireland. *Professional Development in Education*, 38(3), 395-410.
- Menmuir, J., & Hughes, A. (2004). Early education and childcare: The developing professional. *European Early Childhood education research Journal*, 12(2), 33-41.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nailon, D. (2013). Researching ECEC professional development: Using Kelly's repertory grid to examine changes in educators' constructs about curriculum design in early childhood settings. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 38(1), 81-88.
- OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development: Paris.
- Raban, B., Nolan, A., Waniganayake, M., Ure, C., Brown, R., & Deans, J. (2007). *Building capacity: Strategic professional development for early childhood practitioners*. South Melbourne. Vic: Thomson.
- Rodd, J. (2006). *Leadership in early childhood* (3rd ed.). Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
- Russell, A. (2009). *Child care staff: Learning and growing through professional development*. Canberra: Professional Support Coordinator Alliance (PSCA).
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Manni, I. (2007). *Effective leadership in the early years sector: The ELEYS study*. London: Institute of Education University of London.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organisation*. New York: Currency Doubleday.
- Shields, C. (2010). Transformative leadership: Working for equity in diverse contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(4), 558-589.
- Stanfield, R. B. (2000). *The art of focused conversation: 100 ways to access group wisdom in the workplace*. Toronto Canada: Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs.
- Sumsion, J., Barnes, S., Cheeseman, S., Harrison, L., Kennedy, A., & Stonehouse, A. (2009). Insider perspectives on developing Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 34(4), 4-13.
- Tan, S., & Brown, J. (2005). The world café in Singapore: Creating a learning culture through dialogue. *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 41(1), 83-90.
- The Boston Consulting Group. (2008). *National early Childhood development Strategy: report to the ECD Subgroup of the Productivity Agenda Working Group, COAG*.
- Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organisation*, 7, 225-246. Doi: 10.1177/135050840072002
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. M. (2002). *A guide to managing knowledge: cultivating communities of practice*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Press.
- White, P. R. R. (2003). Beyond modality and hedging: A dialogic view of intersubjective stance. *Text*,

Examining focused conversation for leading professional learning and development in early childhood: Highlighting the role of evaluative stance

Author Name: Nailon et al.
Contact Email: Diane.Nailon@utas.edu.au

23(2), 259-284.

Appendix 1: List of Focused Conversations Questions (FDCS Session 2)

Objective questions

What is going on generally in educators' homes? What use of television and multi-media do you see in homes that you visit?

How much of the day do you think television is on in the background/watching television/playing with multi-media

How big is the problem of using television as background noise among educators?

Reflective questions

How do you feel when you visit educators' homes and see children watching television or alternatively you see that the television is turned on to provide background noise?

What do you notice about your reactions?

Are there difficulties that educators are experiencing that are leading them to overuse television or other media throughout the day?

What excites you about the possibility of creating new behaviours where educators offer alternatives to television?

Interpretive questions

What have we learned from our past experiences of change in educators behaviours and what can we bring to this issue?

Do we need any other information about television viewing and young children or the use of media and young children that we think will help us to make change?

What values do we need to hold/clarify as we engage in an action research project around this topic?
What old values do I/we need to throw out what new values might I/we need to take on?

Decisional questions

What are our next steps forward - What do we need to do?

What kind of guidelines can we create for ourselves as we create an action research project?

What skills might each of us bring to the project – how can we help each other?

What will different people do, how will we allocate tasks?

How will we report back?

Appendix 2: Attitude Analysis and Corresponding extract from Transcript

Instantiation	Appraiser	Affect	Judgement	Appreciation	+/-	Appraised
Problematic	Sarah			Valuation	-	The situation with television
Isn't simply background	Sarah			Valuation	-	A television that is turned on
(isn't) innocuous	Sarah			Valuation	-	A television that is turned on
Nice	Barbara	Satisfaction			+	Feeling when TV can be turned off
Turn it off	Barbara		Capacity		-	People's inability to turn off TV
Disappointed	Andrea	Satisfaction			-	Feeling when TV is turned on
Disappointed	Andrea	Satisfaction			-	Feeling when children miss out
Missing out	Andrea		Capacity		-	Missing out on something important
(double coded)	Andrea			Valuation	-	Television (which makes them miss out)
Able to sort of say	Andrea	Security			-	Feeling when unable to express personal emotions
Judgement	Andrea		Propriety		-	Expressing personal emotions
Issue	Andrea		Capacity		-	Holding such strong personal emotions about the topic
Can't stand	Andrea			Reaction	-	Television
(double coded)	Andrea	Happiness			-	Feelings about television
Flexible	Kate		Tenacity		+	Being flexible

Focused conversation discussion

Sarah: It's an emotional response. So it's been hugely problematic or whatever, it's children's eyes, they're going to pivot or whatever ... that colour and, you know that ...you can't assume

Jill: Yes, you know when ads come on, you know, (names advertisement)

Sarah continues: ...that it isn't simply background, it's innocuous ...and that it's not going to have ...mmm

Facilitator: So Barbara what did you want to do with that little baby that you noticed was just turning all the time, when you went in ... and you ...did you go and turn it off (laughs)

Kate: Did you turn it off?

Barbara: Oh no, this is my own grandson that I'm talking about.

Facilitator: Oh, OK (laughter) (others – oh) (more laughter)

Barbara: That's why I'm saying ... I've done observations ...by watching him. So I've put it on ...and he's doing other things on the floor. Straight to it ...when I turned it on.

Kate: Well if it's in a care situation, what could you do?

Barbara: Wouldn't it be nice if you could just turn it off.

Kate: Well, you could sit in front of the TVblock off the screen.

Andrea: I've often felt ...I felt disappointed for the children with the TV on ... I felt disappointed for what they are missing out on

Facilitator: Yes

Andrea continues: But I haven't felt um able to sort of say ... 'cos I think it's a sort of judgement thing ... and I haven't felt ...And I know, it's an issue with me. It's something I've identified in me ... that I can't stand TV. But I need to, I think be a bit ah

Kate: Flexible