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CONTENT

Urban Preschool Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Challenging

Behaviors in Chile, Ecuador and Guatemala

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Abstract

A survey instrument was used to explore preschool early childhood educators' self-reported perceptions and attributions regarding challenging behaviors in young children, in urban areas in Chile (n =120), Ecuador (n = 193), and Guatemala (n = 284). The role of teacher demographics (education, early childhood education and early childhood education teaching experience) on their perceptions and attributions of challenging behavior was also analyzed. Results indicated that across countries there were not significant differences on self-reported preparedness by teachers' demographics, but there were a few significant differences on attributions of challenging behavior across countries. Implications of these findings are discussed from a cross-cultural perspective in terms of preschool professional development and access to culturally relevant programs and approaches to address challenging behaviors.

Keywords: Preschool teacher perceptions, challenging behavior, cross-cultural, behavioral attributions

Introduction

Challenging Behaviors in Preschool Settings

A concern is growing over the number of young children who engage in challenging behaviors in early childhood settings (Benedict, Horner, & Squires, 2007). In the United States, approximately 10% to 21% of preschool children exhibit challenging behaviors (Powell, Fixsen, Dunlap, Smith, & Fox, 2007). For children living in vulnerable and impoverished environments, the risk for developing problem behavior may increase to 30% (Snell, Berlin, Voorhees, Stanton-Chapman, & Hadden, 2012; Kaiser, 2003). Challenging behavior is defined as any repeated pattern of behavior, or perception of behavior that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning and/or engagement in pro-social interactions with peers and adults. Challenging behavior is thus defined on the basis of its effects (Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention, n.d.).

Evidence suggests that young children with challenging behavior present continuing demands on families and teachers alike in the United States (e.g. Dunlap et al., 2006; Powell et al., 2007) and internationally (e.g., Erbas, Turan, Aslan, & Dunlap, 2010; Heo, Cheatham, Hemmeter & Noh, 2014). Young children who display challenging behaviors have an increased risk of experiencing later negative developmental and social outcomes such as peer rejection (e.g. Carter & Van Norman, 2010; Sprague & Perkins, 2009), academic failure (e.g. Dunlap et al., 2006; Powell et al., 2007), and delinquency (e.g. McCabe & Frede, 1997; Sprague & Perkins, 2009).

Because of the potentially serious consequences of behavior problems in young children, both for the individual as well as the larger society, there is a pressing need for effective models to support the social-emotional development of children and prevent challenging behaviors in early child care settings (Benedict et al., 2007; Dunlap et al., 2006; Powell, Dunlap, & Fox, 2006). An understanding of how teachers perceive children's challenging behavior is important to better understand the strategies to address them (e.g., Alter, Walker, & Landers, 2013; Erbus et al., 2010; Heo et al., 2014; Westling, 2010).

Understanding Teacher's Perceptions of Challenging Behaviors

Teachers play a significant role in children's developmental and behavioral outcomes, and teacher effectiveness can have a direct link to the overall classroom environment. Teacher's perception of children's behaviors and the approaches they use to address young children's social-emotional and behavioral needs can impact children's academic, social, and emotional trajectories (e.g., McCabe & Frede, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2007; Westling, 2011).

The need for training regarding working with children that exhibit challenging behaviors has been recognized in early childhood education (ECE) field (e.g., Dunlap et al., 2006; Powell et al., 2007). One important challenge is that teachers consistently feel that they do not receive sufficient training in how to meet both the emotional and learning needs of young children (e.g., Snell et al., 2012; Westling, 2010). Especially in the U.S., a solid foundation of practices specific to the prevention of challenging behaviors in preschool settings has been amassed (Strain, 2009). Little is known, however, regarding challenging behavior management practices in Latin American countries such as Chile, Ecuador and Guatemala. Given these gaps in the literature, and the importance of intervening early with problem behaviors, additional research in these countries is critical.

Preschool Education in Chile, Ecuador and Guatemala

Chile, Ecuador, and Guatemala have state funded services operated (financially and technically) by their corresponding departments of education (Ministerio de Educación), each of them providing private programs which are administratively regulated by assigned offices and personnel. These countries have adopted a mixed model of public and private services, with the prevalence of the public sector as the main provider of ECE, especially in rural areas. Twice as many children from more affluent homes attend private schools, compared to children from the large majority of poor households who attend public ECE funded programs (The United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2010).

Early childhood education teacher education programs. In Chile, most ECE teacher education programs are offered by private and state-funded 5-year university programs. In Ecuador, most teacher education programs are currently university-based bachelor programs, lasting 4 years. By contrast, in Guatemala most of the teacher education programs are offered through a 3-year high school program tailored for licensing ECE teachers (UNESCO, 2010). In the last 10 years, however, 3-to-5-year university programs have been developed in Guatemala for ECE training programs. Across these three countries, each ECE training program determines its own curricula, and therefore, each is unique, making it difficult to compare ECE training related to challenging behaviors in preschool children.

The purpose of this article is to describe an exploratory investigation of preschool teachers' perceptions and practices regarding challenging behavior in Chile, Ecuador, and Guatemala. We address the following research questions: (a) How well prepared do preschool teachers perceive they are for managing challenging behaviors? (b) What are the attributions of young children's challenging behaviors for preschool teachers? Beyond answering these research

questions, we aim to link our findings to pre-service and in-service programs that can improve teachers' skills and knowledge regarding managing challenging behavior.

Methods

Participants

Preschool teachers serving children (3-6 years old) enrolled in private and public urban preschool education programs, in the cities of Santiago, Chile (n = 120); Quito, Ecuador (n = 193); and Guatemala City, Guatemala (n = 284), participated in the study, as seen in Table 1. Several methods for recruiting participants were used, following the University of Oregon and Universidad San Francisco de Quito Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved procedures for international research in the home country. In Chile, participants were invited to participate through the preschool organization "La Protectora de la Infancia"; in Ecuador, through the Universidad San Francisco de Quito's IDEA Institute; and in Guatemala, through the Ministry of Education and Universidad Rafael Landívar. Emails were sent using each institution's database. We do not know specifically how many teachers received the survey link; therefore, we cannot provide an accurate return rate percentage. However, we do know the response rate of those who received, opened the link, and completed the survey: Chile (87%), Ecuador (60%), and Guatemala (89%). Demographic information is displayed on next page in Table 1.

Measure

A 61-item research developed survey (Heo, n.d.) was used for gathering information via Qualtrics. For the current study, the following steps were taken to culturally adapt the survey (see Figure 1). First, the survey was translated from English to Spanish, and then back-translated by a bilingual graduate student. The back-translated survey was sent to the author of the survey to

check agreement between the two versions, to protect against a single translator distortion of

meanings. For each country's final Spanish version, country lead bilingual researchers (first to

fourth authors) reviewed all questions to ensure contextual fit with a group of 3-6 preschool

teachers. Small adaptations were then suggested for some items in order to better communicate the

content in local Spanish (similar to the cultural adaptation process followed by Heo et al, 2014).

The survey, collected online via *Qualtrics*, included questions regarding demographics and

questions related to two constructs: (a) preparedness for managing challenging behaviors, and (b)

behavior attribution, and took between 10-30 minutes to complete.

Table 1

Teachers Demographic Characteristics by Country

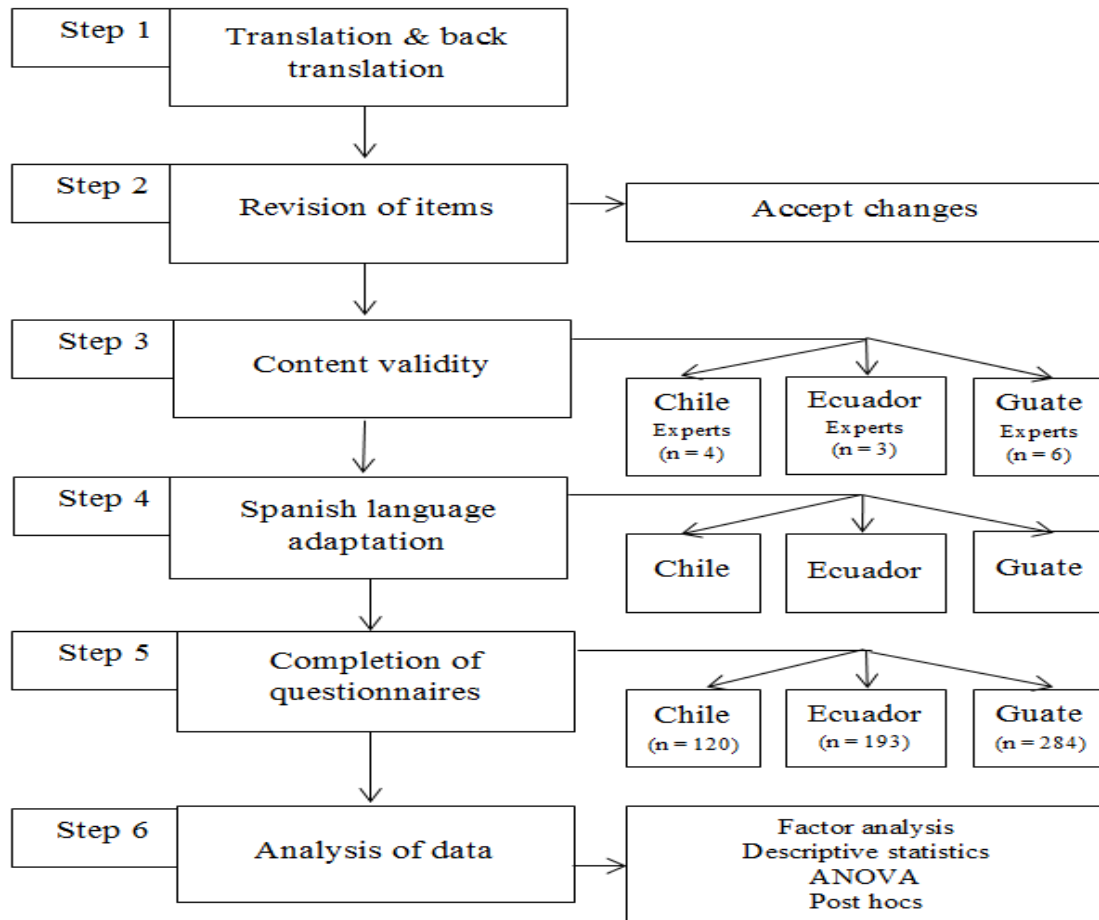| Demographic variables	Chile ($n = 120$) N (%)	Ecuador ($n = 193$) N (%)	Guatemala ($n = 284$) N (%)
Gender			
Female	116 (96.7)	169 (87.6)	278 (97.9)
Masculine	4 (3.3)	24 (12.4)	6 (2.1)
Level of Education/ Teaching Certificate			
High school	2 (1.7)	6 (3.1)	172 (60.6)
Associates degree	28 (23.3)	15 (7.8)	67 (23.6)
College degree	78 (65.0)	115 (59.6)	40 (14.1)
Graduate degree	12 (10.0)	57 (29.5)	5 (1.8)
Total	120 (100.0)	169 (100.0)	284 (100.0)
Classroom Type			
Public Preschool	84 (70.0)	23 (11.9)	173 (60.9)
Private Preschool	3 (2.5)	103 (53.4)	71 (25.0)
Special education preschool	0 (0.0)	8 (4.1)	2 (0.7)
Publicly funded daycare	5 (4.2)	3 (1.6)	13 (4.6)
Private daycare	1 (0.8)	8 (4.1)	3 (1.1)
Other	27 (22.5)	48 (24.9)	22 (7.7)
Total	120 (100.0)	193 (100.0)	284 (100.0)
Early childhood teaching experience			
1-2 years	10 (8.3)	21 (10.9)	19 (6.9)
3-4 years	17 (14.2)	19 (9.9)	23 (8.2)
5-7 years	19 (15.8)	33 (17.2)	98 (35.1)
8 years and more	74 (61.7)	119 (62.0)	139 (49.8)
Total	120 (100.0)	192 (100.0)	279 (100.0)
Special education teaching experience			
Less than 1 year	43 (35.8)	68 (35.2)	143 (50.4)
1-3 years	41 (34.2)	68 (35.2)	38 (13.4)
More than 3 years	20 (16.7)	30 (15.5)	15 (5.3)
No experience	16 (13.3)	27 (14.0)	88 (31.0)
Total	120 (100.0)	192 (100.0)	284 (100.0)
Children with disabilities			
Yes	34 (28.3)	62 (32.1)	54 (19.0)
No	86 (71.7)	131 (67.9)	230 (81.0)
Total	120 (100.0)	192 (100.0)	284 (100.0)

Figure 1. Cultural validation followed for adapting the survey instrument across countries.

Preparedness for managing challenging behaviors. Two questions were related to this

construct (α = .775); participants were asked how prepared they felt for dealing with "common"

and "severe" challenging behaviors. Participants could respond to indicate their agreement or

disagreement using a 4-point scale (i.e., 1 = not at all prepared, 2 = slightly prepared, 3 =

moderately prepared, 4 = extremely prepared). The questions were based on an assumption that

teachers' beliefs, practices and attitudes are important for understanding and improving

educational processes (OECD, 2014).

Behavior attribution. To investigate Latin American early childhood teachers'

perceptions regarding attribution (i.e., causes) of children's challenging behaviors, teachers were

asked their agreement or disagreement related to four constructs, describing reasons why children display challenging behavior. For the items, participants could respond to indicate their agreement or disagreement using a 4-point scale (i.e., 1 = Total disagreement, 2 = disagree, 3 =agree, 4 = total agreement). A principal axis factor analyses was conducted on 17 items with oblique rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, KMO = .82 and all KMO values for individual items were greater than .51, which is within the acceptable limit of .5 (Field, 2013). An initial analysis was computed to obtain eigenvalues for each factor. Four factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and in combination explained 46.34% of the variance. We retained the four factors as follows: (a) function of challenging behavior (5 items, α = .794); (b) family (3 items, α = .778); (c) teacher and classroom (5 items, α = .778); and (d) child's nature (4 items, α = .694). The results of the analysis indicated that the adopted attribution measure for the Latin American population was valid.

Data Analysis

Preliminary analysis of the data was run for testing assumptions of normality; outliers and normality problems were addressed. Analyses were run in three parts. First, because of the exploratory nature of this research, descriptive data as it pertains to each of the identified constructs were analyzed, including ranges, means, and standard deviations. Second, a one way analyses of variance (ANOVA) followed by either the *Scheffe* post-hoc test or independent samples t-test at $p<0.05$ were conducted, with the survey constructs serving as the dependent variable and the demographic variables (i.e. educational level, ECE and early childhood special education [ECSE] teaching experience) used as predictors, in order to explain variability in these constructs. Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 23.0.

Results

In this section, we report specifically on global characteristics and overall similarities and differences across countries. Tables 1-4 summarize results by country.

Demographics

Across countries 94% of all preschool teachers were females ($n = 561$) and six percent were males ($n = 36$); of those, 24 male preschool teachers were from Ecuador.

Educational attainment. One main difference between these countries was that 88% of teachers ($n = 106$) in Chile and 67% ($n = 130$) in Ecuador had either a 3 to 5-year college degree that granted them a teaching license, whereas in Guatemala, 61% ($n = 172$) of teachers obtained a license through their secondary education diploma, meaning that teachers' ages and years of post-secondary education varied by location.

Teaching experience. The majority of the participant teachers (80% and higher) across countries had a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience.

School and classroom characteristics. The main difference across countries was that almost 70% of Guatemalan and Chilean teachers worked in public funded ECE programs, whereas in Ecuador 58% (n = 111) of respondents were working in private settings. On average, there were 28 preschool students per classroom ($M = 28.20$, $SD = 36.32$), with teachers reporting having students between 2-6 years of age. Seventy-five percent ($n = 447$) of teachers did not have any students with a disability enrolled in their classrooms, in spite o national inclusive policies and mandates across the 3 countries. Therefore, more than 70% of respondents across the three countries had little-to-no experience working with children with disabilities.

Self-reported Preparedness for Managing Challenging Behaviors

Across countries, 70% (n = 321) of teachers had students with frequent challenging behavior in their classrooms. Eighty-four percent of teachers (n = 502) reported feeling moderately to well prepared for dealing with common challenging behaviors; whereas 55% (n = 327) reported feeling moderately to well prepared for dealing with severe challenging behaviors, despite 57% (n = 237) of teachers reporting no training about behavior management.

A series of ANOVA were conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in teachers' self-perceptions of their preparedness to manage either common or severe challenging behaviors depending on their demographic variables. Gabriel's pairwise test procedures were used for the unequal sample sizes, using a Games-Howell post-hoc procedure for controlling unequal sample sizes in all ANOVA. See Table 2 for a summary of descriptive statistics and ANOVA results regarding preparedness for managing challenging behaviors by country and demographic variables.

We were interested in exploring how specific demographic variables could explain variability on these constructs. Across countries, teacher's educational level did not have a significant effect on self-reported preparedness regarding managing common challenging behaviors. When comparing ratings by means across countries, slightly different non-statistically significant patterns emerged, for example the more educated teachers in Chile and Guatemala felt more confident in managing severe challenging behaviors than their own colleagues (Chile: M = 2.42, SD = .97; Guatemala: M = 3.00, SD = .00); whereas the most educated Ecuadorian teachers felt less confident to manage severe challenging behaviors (Ecuador: M = 2.39, SD = .88).

Years of preschool teaching experience did not have a significant effect on preparedness regarding managing both common and severe challenging behaviors. Overall, mean ratings across

countries showed that teachers with more teaching experience were less likely to report feeling more prepared to manage both common and severe challenging behaviors, whereas teachers with fewer years of experience generally indicated they felt more prepared. For example, teachers with 1-2 years of teaching experience rated themselves highly capable for managing severe challenging behaviors (Chile: $M = 2.60$, $SD = .52$; Ecuador: $M = 2.67$, $SD = .73$; Guatemala: $M = 2.58$, $SD = .60$); teachers with eight or more years of teaching experience rated themselves lower (Chile: $M = 2.33$, $SD = .77$; Ecuador: $M = 2.47$, $SD = .87$); with the exception of Guatemala ($M = 2.61$, $SD = .74$).

Overall, there were not significant differences across countries related to whether having ECSE teaching experience had an impact on self-reported preparedness for managing challenging behaviors. The only significant difference was that Chilean's teachers ECSE experience was related to a higher perceived ability of dealing with common challenging behaviors ($t=-2.07$, $p<0.05$). There was a slight difference among means across countries reflecting that teachers with ECSE teaching experience more frequently reported feeling more prepared to manage both common and severe challenging behavior (Table 2).

Attribution of Challenging Behaviors

A series of ANOVA were conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in teachers' perceptions of challenging behavior attributions, depending on teachers' experience and educational level across countries. Gabriel's pairwise test procedures were used to cope with unequal sample sizes, using a Games-Howell post-hoc procedure for controlling unequal sample sizes in all ANOVA. We carried out post hoc tests to compare all three countries' participants with each other, to better understand the direction of the similarities or differences. Welch's F was reported when homogeneity of variance assumption was not met.

Table 2

Means, Standards Deviations, and One-Way Analyses of Variance Summary Table for Preparedness for Managing Common and Severe Challenging Behavior across Countries

Variable	Chile (N = 120) Common		Severe		Ecuador (N = 193) Common		Severe		Guatemala (N = 284) Common		Severe	
	M (SD)	F/t	M (SD)	F/t	M (SD)	F/t	M (SD)	F/t	M (SD)	F/t	M (SD)	F/t
Education												
Highschool	3.50 (0.70)		2.00 (0.00)		3.17 (0.75)	0.60	2.50 (0.84)		3.03 (0.59)	1.64	2.65 (0.68)	1.96
Associate	2.86 (0.59)		2.14 (0.71)		3.00 (0.54)		2.53 (0.92)		2.87 (0.75)		2.43 (0.84)	
College	3.03 (0.64)	0.91	2.40 (0.76)	0.92	3.16 (0.64)		2.60 (0.83)	0.99	3.10 (0.63)		2.60 (0.67)	
Graduate	3.00 (0.73)		2.42(0.97)		3.04(0.68)		2.39 (0.88)		3.20(0.45)		3.00(.00)	
Early childhood teaching experience												
< 2 years	3.20 (0.42)		2.60 (0.52)		3.19 (0.68)		2.67 (0.73)		3.05 (0.41)		2.58 (0.60)	
3-4 years	2.82 (0.73)	1.23	2.12 (0.60)	0.30[a]	3.00 (0.58)	0.45	2.47 (0.84)	0.68	2.91 (0.73)	0.69	2.57 (0.79)	0.07
5-7 years	3.16 (0.69)		2.42 (0.90)		3.18 (0.64)		2.67 (0.85)		3.06 (0.64)		2.57 (0.72)	
8 years or >	2.96 (0.63)		2.33 (0.77)		3.09 (0.66)		2.47 (0.87)		2.96 (0.65)		2.61 (0.74)	
Special education teaching experience												
None	2.81 (0.79)	-2.07*	2.19 (0.73)	1.81	3.06 (0.69)	-0.62	2.54 (0.76)	0.57	3.00 (0.61)	-0.38	2.59 (0.67)	-0.25
1 year or >	3.10 (0.51)		2.39 (0.80)		3.12 (0.63)		2.47 (0.88)		3.04 (0.62)		2.62 (0.74)	

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; F = F-test; < less than; > = more than; Scale for responding the questions went from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree.

*p < .05

[a] Welch's *F* reported when homogeneity of variances was unequal.

Table 3 and 4 summarize descriptive statistics, post hoc analyses and ANOVA for attributions by country. Specifically, Table 3 provides information by overall attribution constructs and Table 4 provides information by items. Overall percentages are provided in the text section to highlight similitudes and differences between countries.

Table 3

Attributions Regarding Causes of Young Children' Challenging Behaviors by area

Variable	Chile N =115 M (SD)	Ecuador N = 171 M (SD)	Guatemala N = 276 M (SD)	Post Hoc Test	F
Function	2.95 (.60)	3.03 (.51)	3.12 (.51)	CHI<GUA	4.54**
Children's Nature	2.35 (.54)	2.50 (.55)	2.62 (.54)	CHI<GUA, ECU	10.74***
Family	3.31 (.65)	3.41 (.54)	3.42 (.56)	-	1.5
Teacher/Classroom	2.91 (.64)	3.10 (.48)	2.93 (.63)	CHI, GUA<ECU	4.90**
Total	2.88(.39)	3.01(.35)	3.02(.37)	CHI< ECU, GUA	6.467**

*p <.05 **p < .01 *** p< .001

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Table 4

Attributions Regarding Causes of Young Children' Challenging Behaviors by items

Variable / Item	Chile N =115 M (SD)	Ecuador N = 171 M (SD)	Guatemala N = 276 M (SD)	F	Post Hoc Test
Function					
To obtain adults' attention	3.34 (0.69)	3.36 (0.68)	3.34 (0.62)	0.05	
To get a preferred activity	2.96 (0.72)	2.96 (0.78)	3.08 (0.66)	1.96	
To escape non-preferred tasks	2.74 (0.85)	2.98 (0.72)	3.06 (0.72)	7.42***	CHI<ECU,GUA
To obtain preferred items or toys	2.98 (0.77)	2.95 (0.71)	3.10 (0.69)	2.48	
To obtain peer attention	2.73 (0.85)	2.91 (0.72)	3.03 (0.72)	6.79***	CHI<GUA
Children's Nature					
Because of their disabilities	2.15 (0.79)	2.57 (0.85)	2.46 (0.79)	9.77***	CHI<GUA,ECU
Because of their personalities	2.92 (0.68)	2.94 (0.70)	3.02 (0.64)	1.26	
Because of their genes	2.50 (0.85)	2.48 (0.77)	2.69 (0.76)	4.74**	CHI<GUA
Because of their gender	1.82 (0.70)	2.02 (0.73)	2.31 (0.78)	20.16***	CHI<GUA, ECU
Family					
Because of parenting skills	3.26 (0.80)	3.35 (0.71)	3.39 (0.67)	1.38	
Because parents do not use effective discipline	3.24 (0.80)	3.45 (0.60)	3.37 (0.68)	3.17*	CHI<ECU, GUA
Because of a stressful home situation	3.43 (0.70)	3.44 (0.69)	3.50 (0.65)	0.62	
Teacher/Classroom					
Physical environments (i.e., classroom structure) are not structured appropriately	2.50 (0.79)	2.65 (0.80)	2.56 (0.84)	1.27	-
Positive relationships are not established	2.49 (0.77)	3.06 (0.71)	2.60 (0.77)	26.25***	CHI,GUA < ECU
Lack of teachings social skills children	2.79 (0.96)	3.01 (0.72)	2.75 (0.73)	6.92**	GUA, CHI<ECU
Teachers lack skills for dealing with problem behaviors	2.44 (0.88)	3.14 (0.76)	2.68 (0.90)	25.90***	CHI<GUA<ECU
Because of poor teacher-parent communication	2.56 (0.86)	3.19 (0.69)	2.90 (0.84)	21.53***	CHI<GUA<ECU

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Note. Scale for responding the questions went from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. CHI = Chile; ECU = Ecuador; GUA = Guatemala; > larger than; < smaller than; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; F = F-test

*p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Function of behavior attribution. Overall, 88% of teachers (n = 524) agreed or strongly agreed with attributing children's challenging behavior attempting to obtain adult's attention; 75% (n = 456) to get a preferred activity; 72% (n = 435) to escape from non-preferred tasks; 78% (n = 466) to obtain preferred items or toys; 70% (n = 422) to obtain peer attention.

There were significant group differences among countries on two items related to function of behavior attribution., Chilean teachers were less likely to attribute children's challenging behaviors to escaping from non-preferred tasks (F = 7.42, p < .001) and obtaining peer attention as a cause of challenging behaviors (F= 6.79, p < .01). Overall, results indicated that there was a significant group difference (F= 4.54, p<.01). Chilean teachers were less likely to attribute children's challenging behaviors to any of the possible functions compared to their counterparts, specifically compared to Guatemalan teachers.

Children' nature attribution. Overall, across countries 54% of teachers (n = 325) agreed or strongly agreed with attributing children's disabilities as a causal factor for causing challenging behaviors; 18% (n = 109) attributed it to children's temperament; 43% (n = 257) to children's genes; 69% (n = 409) to children's gender. Educational level did have a significant effect across countries on this type of attribution ($F(2, 559) = 9.03$, p .00). The higher educational attainment obtained by teachers, the less likely they were to attribute challenging behaviors to children's nature characteristics. Post hoc analyses indicated that Chilean teachers were less likely to attribute children's disabilities, genetic

composition and gender as causing challenging behaviors. Years of teaching ECSE experience did not have any effect on this type of attribution on teachers across countries.

Family attribution. Overall, across countries 85% (n = 511) teachers agreed or strongly agreed with attributing parenting skills as a causal factor for causing challenging behaviors; 87% (n = 518) attributed challenging behaviors to parents' lack of using effective discipline; 88% (n = 526) to a stressful home situation. Educational level, years of preschool and special education teaching experience did not have a significant effect on this type of attribution. When comparing means between countries by year of preschool teaching experience, a pattern emerged in all three countries: teachers with eight years or more of teaching experience were less likely to attribute challenging behaviors to family attributions when compared to teachers with less experience.

Teacher and classroom attribution. Overall, across countries 47% (n = 283) teachers agreed or strongly agreed with attributing classroom physical environment as a causal factor for causing challenging behaviors; 57% (n = 343) attributed it to teachers not having established a positive relationship with their students; 88% (n = 526) to the lack of teaching social skills for children; and 58% (n = 348) to teachers not having sufficient skills for dealing with problem behavior. Educational level indicated an effect on this type of attribution (F(2, 559) = 3.93, p .02). Post hoc follow-up procedures showed that Ecuadorian teachers were more likely to attribute teacher skills and classroom characteristics as a causal factor of challenging behaviors when compared to their counterparts. Years of ECE and ECSE teaching experience did not have a significant effect on this type of attribution across countries. When comparing means between

countries by year of preschool teaching experience, a pattern emerged in all three countries alike. Teachers with eight years or more of teaching experience were slightly more likely to attribute challenging behaviors to teacher and classroom characteristics, such as physical environments (M = 2.61, SD = .80);, lack of establishing a positive relationship with student (M = 2.75, SD = .78), and not having enough skills for dealing with problem behaviors (M = 2.88, SD = .90) compared to teachers with less experience.

Discussion

The analysis of the survey data enabled transnational comparisons in ECE systems across three Latin American countries, each with a wide range of public policy efforts, delivery models and providers, and expectations for classroom behavior management and child outcomes. The teacher self-reported data revealed a set of key findings. The primary purpose of the survey was to determine Latin American early childhood educators' general perceptions and attributions regarding young children's challenging behaviors in urban contexts in three different Spanish-speaking countries (i.e., Chile, Ecuador, and Guatemala). The secondary purpose was to provide recommendations to strengthen pre-service and in-service preschool teacher training regarding behavior management in these countries.

Teacher perceptions about possible causes of challenging behaviors are important to understanding ways in which teachers may be able to create and maintain appropriate

behavior of students in classroom settings while enhancing prosocial behavior and increasing student engagement (Alter et al., 2013; Emmer & Sabornie, 2015). Generally, there were few significant differences across countries. Overall results suggested that across countries the majority of teachers reported not having been trained in behavior management foundations and techniques in their teaching training programs. However, a large number of teachers reported feeling in some way prepared to handle common challenging behaviors, while slightly fewer reported feeling less prepared to handle severe challenging behaviors. This may be because teachers have learned some behavior management skills outside of formal training (i.e., through reading, observing colleagues, and personal experiences). When analyzing teachers' self-reported preparedness for managing challenging behaviors, we did not find any significant relation linked to their educational attainment. This lack of differences could be related to self-reported preparedness because challenging behavior management practices are not learned as part of their professional training. A minor difference was observed, however, for those teachers who` had at least an associate degree, who overall felt more prepared to deal with severe challenging behaviors. We do not know specifically what these teachers learned regarding behavior management, given that each institution creates different training programs. However, in the ECE/ECSE field we know that high quality teacher education has a direct impact on child outcomes (Dunlap et al., 2006; Carter & Van Norman, 2010; Emmer & Sabornie, 2015).

According to U.S. estimates, the prevalence of children in ECE programs with significant conduct and self-regulatory problems is approximately 20%, and up to 70% of

children have developmental delays/disabilities (Strain, n.d.). These figures may be true also for Chile, Ecuador, and Guatemala, although, there are no official data. It is well documented that without effective early intervention, young children with significant challenging behaviors may be expelled at a rate more than three times that of their older peers in K-12 grades (Gilliam, 2005), and that they are at increased risk for academic failure, rejection by peers and teachers, and delinquent behavior (Dunlap et al, 2006; Powell et al, 2007). Therefore, effects of classroom management are crucial for preventing and effectively dealing with early child conduct problems (Fox, Hemmeter, Snyder, Binder, & Clarke, 2011). Consequently, it is necessary that training programs in this region develop high quality social emotional and behavior management training programs, given that their teachers reported not having such training opportunities, especially with the limited resources available to many preschool programs. This limitation may be particularly true in low and middle income (LAMI) countries, making it important to explore the efficacy of interventions to enhance teachers' classroom management skills that are culturally responsive as well as cost effective (Fox et al., 2011).

Generally, years of ECE and ECSE teaching experience were not significantly related to ratings regarding preparedness to manage challenging behaviors across these countries. This outcome was somewhat similar to results obtained by Stormont, Lewis, and Covington-Smith (2005), and Kim, Stormont, and Espinosa (2009), in which teaching experience were not significantly associated to addressing challenging behaviors. It could be that there are fewer opportunities for professional growth in

environments where teachers are not receiving adequate high quality training regarding challenging behaviors; therefore, teachers' practices do not seem to be affected by teaching experience. Interestingly, teachers with only 1-2 years of preschool teaching experience reported feeling more prepared to address challenging behaviors than teachers with more than 2 years of experience. In contrast, having experience with teaching ECSE, teachers across countries reported feeling more prepared to address common and severe challenging behaviors, especially in Chile. This finding is similar to a study by Westling (2010), in which special education and general education teachers indicated that they had learned about how to deal with "most" challenging behavior through experience, and most did not perceive their professional preparation to be adequate for addressing challenging behavior.

Furthermore, regarding teachers' perceptions of attributions causing children's challenging behaviors, overall across countries teachers were less likely to name children's inherent factors (i.e., disabilities, temperament, genes, and gender) as causal factors, especially in Chile. These results corroborate outcomes by Walker and Plomin (2005), who found that teachers perceived that behavior problems were less genetically influenced than other domains such as intelligence or learning difficulties. Overall, across countries, teachers were more likely to attribute challenging behaviors to family factors (such as poor parenting skills, lack of effective discipline, and stressful home environment). Given that families may play a role in both shaping and maintaining problem behavior, it seems natural that teachers identified family skills and situations as contributing to behavior problems (Fettig & Ostrosky, 2011). However, we are not sure if

they were just identifying or blaming families for their children's challenging behaviors which is troublesome for establishing and maintaining effective teacher-parent collaboration (Division for Early Childhood, 2015). On average, the more educated the teacher, the more likely they were to attribute challenging behaviors to teacher-classroom characteristics (Heo et al., 2014). This was especially true for Ecuadorian teachers who were more likely to attribute challenging behaviors to teacher/classroom factors, such as lack of teaching social skills for children and not having enough skills for dealing with challenging behaviors.

Finally, the regulation of ECE direct services and professional pre-service and in-service regulation is mainly at a national level across the three countries, with national ECE curriculum guidance but no specific pedagogical approach for ECE. This cross-national study about perceptions of challenging behaviors reveals that ECE appear to be very similar in the study countries, both within and between countries. Differences were minimum across countries and those differences could not be completely teased out and understood though our survey-comparative-design. Opportunities for identifying differences and variation across countries emerged in this study, but further research is needed in order to better understand each country's practices and policies.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample of early childhood teacher respondents may not be representative for each country. A second limitation is the use of teacher self-report. Though acceptable for discerning teachers' beliefs, actual teacher behaviors as they relate to a behavioral perspective are indicative of the extent to which

they act on their beliefs. Recording or observing teacher behaviors was outside the scope of the current study. Third, the study sample was limited to early childhood educators within the cities of each of our participant countries, and therefore may not be generalizable to early educators in other contexts and countries. Finally, there are relevant cultural characteristics that are unique to each country that may reflect teacher training and teaching practices that were not studied in this study.

Implications

Early childhood education teachers gain more competence when they receive adequate training regarding social-emotional/behavioral interventions to address children's needs (Carter & Van Norman, 2010; Fox et al., 2011). Given the well-known negative impact of challenging behavior on children's behavioral trajectories when not addressed in an appropriate and timely way, it is crucial that ECE teachers obtain adequate training (Dunlap et al., 2006). The implications for pre-service and in-service training in Chile, Ecuador, and Guatemala are vital. These three countries shared commonalities in perceptions regarding preparedness and attributions of challenging behaviors, despite demographic and geographic differences. There were also some strong differences in the way their teachers perceived and attributed challenging behaviors. In the case of Ecuador, teachers attributed challenging behaviors to teacher-classroom characteristics, whereas Chilean teachers were less likely to attribute it to children's inherent nature such as gender and disability.

Teacher training in classroom behavior management. There was an overall lack of information on the specifics of what and how classroom behavior management is

taught during pre-service and in-service training, including the specific theoretical underpinnings in each country. Therefore, it is difficult to determine if what is taught during pre-service and in-service training draws from "evidence-based" practices. Access to multi-tiered effective programs is limited in Spanish speaking countries, and when used they need to be empirically studied. More cross-cultural research needs to document local effective practices and adaptation of evidence-based programs from other countries. As a field we need to better understand how effective practices are used in different contexts from which they were developed, while documenting how practices are implemented, adopted and adapted to respond to cultural values and needs (e.g., Erbas et al., 2010; Heo et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2009).

Child outcomes. Given that teachers reported having little training focused on supporting children with challenging behaviors, the likelihood of preschoolers not receiving adequate services and supports, and possibly being expelled from early childhood programs is high (Dunlap et al., 2006; Gilliam, 2005). We hypothesize that this would be especially true for at-risk children (e.g. children living in poverty and dangerous neighborhoods) (Kaiser, 2003; Powell et al., 2007), which is the reality of many preschoolers in LAMI countries. Given that social and behavioral competence in young children more accurately predicts academic performance in 1st grade than cognitive skills and family backgrounds (Fox & Smith, 2007), it is crucial that vulnerable children receive high-quality supports for developing and strengthening such competence. Furthermore, at a classroom level, the overall loss of pedagogical and instructional time is magnified in preschool settings with little or non-effective basic behavior management

skills, with a direct effect on children's developmental and academic opportunities and trajectories (Sprague & Perkins, 2009).

Given that challenging behaviors persist and even escalate during and after the preschool years (Powell et al., 2006), it is urgent that systematic, evidence-based approaches be promoted, developed, and adopted. By investing in culturally relevant teacher training and technical support, children's outcomes will be improved and teachers will be more equipped to respond to challenging behaviors during the preschool years, and afterwards.

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Asserting Agency: Children´s Tactics to Navigate in Early Childhood Education[1]

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Abstract

This paper is based on an empirical study of children´s day-to-day interactions in a bilingual early childhood education setting in Germany and seeks to address the topic of children's *agency*. The ethnographic approach is used to identify tactics children use to assert their agency by examining children's agentic interactions with teachers and other children. The analysis focuses on two particular instances which illustrate how children's meanders to manifest agency can be recognized in everyday practice. In line with findings of other relevant researches six similar tactics are highlighted: silent avoidance, (verbal/non-verbal) refusal, (verbal/non-verbal) negotiation, coping, partial acceptance and solidarity. These strategies show how children view themselves as competent to negotiate the social order and challenge adult-definition of power within the daily routines and success in creating time and space on their own terms.

Keywords: child agency, strategies, early childhood education, agentic action, ethnographic study.

1. Introduction

Highlighting the role of agency in interactional accomplishments, this paper seeks to address children's agency in an early childhood education setting, by examining children's agentic[1] interactions with teachers and other children. Using ethnographic methods this paper expands on previous academic work on children's agency in early childhood education (e.g. Ebrahim, 2011; Mashford-Scott & Church, 2011; Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2005; Baraldi & Iervese, 2014) and their strategies for agency (e.g. Markström & Halldén, 2009; Dotson & Vaquera, 2015), mechanisms for relative autonomy (Punch, 2001) and participation (Bae, 2009; Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010; Pettersson, 2015; Mashford-Scott & Church, 2011). Two empirically based examples are presented to illustrate how children's meanders to manifest agency can be recognized in everyday practice.

Child agency is essential to early learning. The idea that children learn through *active* interaction with others and the environment, highlights the foundational role of "emergent interactive agency" to learning and development. Supporting this, research on brain development indicate agentic actions as foundational in shaping neurological functioning (Diamond, 1988; Kolb & Whishaw, 1998, in Bandura, 2001, p. 4). Paying attention to how children negotiate for agency in cultural routines within an early childhood setting may prove to be a meaningful resource for processes in which

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[1] Agentic: The adjectival form for agency. It seems there is no consensus of opinion for using a specific form. Other writers use agential or agentic (Ahearn, 2001, p. 110). In this paper, agentic shall be used.

children by negotiating institutional border and social order construct at the same time the institution itself and their own childhood also (Markström & Halldén, 2009, p. 114).

Focusing on interaction within young children (children's peer routines) Corsaro (2005) notes this interpretive reproduction as children "do not simply internalize society and culture (in James, 2009, p. 19). They "strive to interpret or make sense of their culture and to participate in it". Children as active, creative and collective agents, come to build their own peer-social worlds and cultures by interpreting adult culture (p. 24). And by developing their own cultures, children exercise agency with other peers and adults in numerous ways. Waksler's research in the UK (1991b; 1996) detects different techniques such as *lie*, *fake illness*, *temper tantrums* or *act extra cute* to cope with and control certain aspects of their lives (in Punch, 2001, p. 3).

The Childhood Studies provides the theoretical framework for this project which views children not "merely as recipients of adults' actions" (Markström & Halldén, 2009, p. 113) rather as competent and active agents. As Mayall defines, children are actors in that they do initiate acts to produce desired results and agents in that they converse and interact with other people and, in doing so, they make things happen conducting social and cultural changes (Mayall, 2002 in James, 2009, p. 41). This also means acknowledging the various consequences that their actions[2] have.

Turning to definitional issues, the concept of agency has been approached from many perspectives ─both theoretically and empirically─ and has certainly been

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[2] Action: "The realization of a purpose or goal, assisted by empirical knowledge about the world" (Fuchs, 2001, p. 26).

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conceptualized and operationalized in many ways in multiple disciplines. While exploring the concept one gets quickly aware of the long list of terms which agency has been correlated with: *self/person-hood*, (*free*) *will*, *goal*, *motivation*, *purpose(iveness)*, *intention*(*ality*), *choice*, *rationality, freedom*, (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 962) *action*, *self-presence* (Segal, 1991), *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1994), and many more. This is only a first indicator of the concept's great complexity and broad theoretical dimensions.

This paper's working definition for agency draws on the one given by James and James, namely "the capacity of individuals to act independently" (James & James, 2008, p. 9). However, the concept of agency implies not only an individual competence, but also the social interactions of individuals, thus, capability for shaping one´s own life and influencing the social context can be seen as two key concepts in understanding children´s agency (Baraldi & Iervese, 2014, p. 2-3). In this perspective, agency is exercised in the choice among the different possibilities for action which entails "the realizability of more than one path" (Harré, 1984, in Messer-Davidow, 1995, p. 26). Hence, children's agency can be seen as related to "change and unpredictability in interactions" (Baraldi & Iervese, 2014, p. 2) and children as "agents who can act otherwise" (Messer-Davidow, 1995, p. 28) and can transform institution´s structures of interactions.

2. Why agency in early childhood education?[3]

As an early childhood educator, I experience aspects of children's lives in this institutional social context on a daily basis. Paying attention to their interactions and experiences both with peers and educators, I have come to appreciate the creativity and autonomy of children's peer culture and realize that the quality of their experiences is either empowered or limited by power relation and social order. Children's activities in specific situations reveal how children treat teacher's social order either by utilizing or contradicting it, and in doing so they are able to create time and space for themselves, i.e. "the pedagogy of time and pace" (Markström, 2005, in Markström & Halldén, 2009, p. 116). It is exactly this kind of agency that captures my attention in this paper; the one that children demonstrate by striving for personal autonomy as shown in ways they use to escape or resist institution's normality and simultaneously defend the emergence of an alternative normality.

3. This early childhood education institution

The days of the week are scheduled. Timetables divide the days into parts and determine what activity and where should be taking place and at which time. This in turn indicates in which room and at which time children are supposed to be. The

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[3] Paraphrasing Messer-Davidow's question "Why agency now?" in *Acting Otherwise*. In her book the feminist scholar and activist clarifies from a feminist point of view that the subject of agency and the questions it arises are so central to contemporary politics that agentic practices should not be regarded simply as a problematic of academic theoretical debates but should be recognized as the core of profound social changes (1995, p. 23-25).

educators´ role is to orchestrate individual and collective activities, and to organise and guide the group of children. On the other hand, not all time is adult-controlled in detail.

Play is one of the most distinctive features of early childhood (CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1, p.15). It "allows space for children´s freedom of expression and taking part as active agents" (Bae, 2009, p. 401). Early childhood education is also a place where there is considerable acceptance of the children expressing their views. The basic principle governing this institution's functioning is that of freedom of choice and children´s free play. Its educators are constantly engaged in inventing ways for giving children free space where they develop their own individual interests and facilitating their independent participation. Even so, children are constantly under the watch of adults and even free-time and free-play is regulated by pre-set rules and scheduled routines. In her ethnographic study of Danish kindergartens, Gulløv points out as bizarre this inconsistency in preschool between the "surveillance" over the children, in the sense of control and protection, and at the same time their acknowledgement as self-managing individuals (Gulløv, 2003, p. 24). Lastly, along with being individuals entitled to freedom of expression and their own views, children are also part of a community.

4. Background of the research

This paper is based on empirical study of children´s day-to-day interactions in a, predominantly bilingual and very familiar to the researcher, kindergarten setting in Germany. The kindergarten, located in the middle of a residential area, is consisted of a building whose exit leads almost directly onto the road, with a small playground on its

left side surrounded by a fence. It also consisted of 46 children in the age range of two to seven years old and staffed by eight educators and preschool teachers. It could be described as a socially mixed kindergarten. The teachers tend to describe the families as predominantly 'middle class' with some 'working class' families. Before the research process, I discussed with the staff about the research and secured their verbal consent. I also handed out and secured consent forms from parents regarding children's involvement in the research.

Also, this research was conducted taking into consideration ethical issues regarding the children's right to privacy and autonomy, as well as their will and desire to participate. It was in this case of special importance to avoid the pitfall of reproducing the same image of the child as passive product of social structures that scholarship within the field of Childhood Studies has been disapproving for years now. Children are seen as competent enough to choose whether or not to participate, therefore, verbal ongoing consent from them, in the beginning and throughout the research process was obtained. An initial group discussion was carried out during morning circle-time where the children were given explanations about the study. I informed them that I wanted to observe their play and that if they were not willing to participate in it, they could reject my presence at any time, and that this would be okay.

In total, only 25 children, four to seven years old, were observed in this research because by the age of four the frequency of socially oriented interactions (including conflicts about social order, play and ideas) seems to be greater and more intense (Chen et al, 2001). When discussing children activities pseudonyms are used for each child's

name. The kindergarten teachers are identified simply as 'Educator' rather than by name in the descriptions for better readability and as Mashford-Scott & Church acknowledge, it "privileges a particular institutional role" (2011, p. 21).

Systematic documenting of children's interactions and particularly participant observation are in an educator's job description. However, my systematic ethnographic fieldwork focused on this paper's specific topic was carried out during two weeks (mid-February) which I spent using an ethnographic and participatory approach to data collection (participant observation and informal conversations). I attended 5 days per week spending on average three to four hours each day.

5. *Methodology*

This qualitative research is a micro-ethnographic study which seeks to identify ways in which children, in their day-to-day interactions assert their right to agency. Essentially, the focus is on children's interaction with their "important others" in this early childhood education setting, i.e. peers and educators, and the different mechanisms they use for negotiating their participation in collective activities, claiming their personal autonomy and discussing the terms of the existing social order (Markström & Halldén, 2009, p. 112-115). More concretely, it seeks to delineate: which actions in everyday practices within this institution's routine context, can be identified as children's initiatives to assert personal autonomy and to negotiate this institution's social order. For the sake of brevity and to make a clearer point, this research is mainly

limited to child-adult interactions and the question "Why do children act?" is not investigated in this project as it goes beyond its initial purpose and its factual potential.

There was the limitation of not obtaining authorization for audio recording in this specific early childhood setting. This meant that the methodology of conversation analysis (CA) could not be used as recordings seem to be CA's basic data source. Video-filming was not considered as part of the methodology firstly because it was doubtful whether consent would be ensured from adult gatekeepers and secondly, as it involves a risk of the participants feeling objectified (Bae, 2009, p. 402), time was not promising enough to prepare both teachers and children for the experience of being video-recorded. So, the descriptions of interactions between children and teachers captured in this paper are result of fieldnotes observation which were fleshed out as soon as possible after the observation was completed. Also, the permission to share images from the data in this project is limited thus the descriptions provided delineate the distinctive aspects of interest manifested in children's interactions.

To effectively address the overall research problem an exploratory research design was conducted using ethnographic approach and participant observation as a part of field research method. Concretely, the methodological strategy used consisted of closely observing situated activities in their natural settings. Children were not asked to 'do' anything outside their everyday practice as the intention was to enable them to express themselves freely in order to document and analyse instances in naturally-occurring situations and of course not to impose the researcher's own views (Punch, 2002, p.325).

Exploratory design in this case is useful because the particular topic of this project in international academic literature seems to be in a preliminary stage of investigation, i.e. children's strategies to re-negotiate institution-imposed boundaries have been the focus of relatively few studies (Goddard & White, 1982, in Punch, 2001, p. 3). Therefore, this exploratory research can be seen as firstly establishing an understanding of how best to proceed in studying this subject but also as laying the initial ground work for future research. And since understanding sometimes takes a back seat to listening and observing, ethnographic approach which relies on participant observation as a research strategy, was chosen as a suitable research method. Drawing on Corsaro & Fingerson, ethnographic approach was considered appropriate because:

Ethnography is an especially good method for studying young children because many features of their interactions and cultures are produced and shared in the present and cannot easily be obtained by way of interviews or surveys. (Corsaro & Fingerson, 2006, p. 131)

Participant observation is considered a "traditional 'adult' research method" (Punch, 2002, p. 330) but there occurred no need to adapt it. The semi-structured interviews planned were adapted to 'friendly' informal conversations with a fairly open framework which allowed for two-way communication. This way, children could also ask questions to me and it can be considered more participatory. I recorded only brief notes during the conversation which took place as soon as possible later during the day. The initial notes

were supplemented with additional detail, important facts as soon as possible after the observation, and was written down as thoroughly as possible, even though at times this was in a more descriptive form.

During the initial discussion children were asked to suggest where they would like to be observed. They had to choose between two settings which I had previously prepared in photos. So, the choices were the so-called *free-play* time or *teacher-led* time. The decision was almost unanimously on free-play time. So, the context in both examples is a free-play situation located in the transitional time point from a free to a routinized activity.

I tried to take some photos of the occurring interactions but did not succeed in having pictures from all of them. So, the two selected instances were among the ones that a picture was not acquired. However, these photos were shown to the children involved in the interactions by the end of the research process both as a meta-cognitive activity to reflect on the instances and interactions, but also to develop reciprocity with the participant children and share part of the knowledge gained.

6. *Reflecting the research process*

Ethnographic research usually involves long-lasting fieldwork, i.e. getting access to a group and carrying out intensive observation in a field setting for a certain period of time (Corsaro & Fingerson, 2006, p. 131) In order for the ethnographic interpretation of the interactions of the participants to be valid, the researcher needs to gain knowledge of the "institutional settings, daily routine of activities, beliefs that guide participants´

actions, and other semiotic systems relevant to the context and activities" (Corsaro & Eder, 1999, p. 521). In this case, it can be considered an advantage that there was a prior knowledge of the social context and the under-study institution's settings, i.e. the architectural and material conditions, daily routines, group's everyday life, activities, interactions, in the sense that the documenting process was less time-consuming.

Also, from his extended research experience and fieldwork in collaborating with teachers in different institutions he sees "a researcher role that is close to children's experiences as a prerequisite" (Bae, 2009, p. 402). Punch also stresses the importance of devoting time to "form a relationship and gain children´s trust" (Punch, 2002, p. 325). Therefore, the pre-existing closeness to the children's everyday life can be argued to be an advantage in the sense that it was unlikely that children would consider me (when positioned as a fieldwork observer in the interactions) to be *invading* their space.

On the other hand, the fact that I was the only observer, can be viewed as a methodological problem. Since there is no such thing as a tabula rasa when it comes to human beings, and a fieldworker is a human being, unrecognized and unexamined assumptions render the research instrument as defective and bring contamination to the field. These issues are to be taken into consideration.

Assumptions that might seem valid because we believe that we know and understand children, both because we were children once and because we see them so often, present a methodological problem. (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988, p.35, in Punch 2002, p. 325).

Furthermore, arguably, the degree of the natural capacity of one single fieldworker to observe, record and analyse, affects the research´s process in the sense that it takes a personal nuance and in this case, can be possible that the theoretical bias coloured my own perceptions of the under-study subject.

The context and setting of the research was important as it is in every research with children and adults. Drawing on (Markström & Halldén, 2009, p.113-114) from a child perspective, early childhood institutions where children spend quite a few hours of their day with other children and adults, can be deemed as a "children's place", i.e. a place where they are engaged in establishing a day-to-day social life. Therefore, reflecting on using an early childhood institution as a research environment it can be argued that conducting research with children in their own environment can promote their feeling of comfort (Punch, 2002, p. 328).

There was no pre-set limiting of what will be observed and no real ending point in this ethnographic study. However, reflecting on the type of the interactions to be observed, "the paradox of agency which is very evident in the interplay of facilitators' promotion and students' active participation" (Baraldi & Iervese, 2014, p.11) was borne in mind.

Reflecting on this research's initial design, before going on field, it felt to be more an *on* children research rather than a *with* children research, which O'Kane (2000) points out as an important methodological issue (in Corsaro & Fingerson, 2006). To include children as active participant in the research, the choice of the setting was included and

the semi-structured informal conversations. The latter in the end confirmed what was already grasped from the interactions but also provided some reasons for children's answers.

Having in mind the issue of the "clarity of language" which Punch underlines as vital in research with children (Punch, 2002, p. 328), I indeed experienced some difficulties in giving the children the best possible, easily understandable information about the research. However, no one rejected my presence during the observations.

To limit the influence on the research process that my positioning as a 'familiar adult' in this setting would bring, the instances chosen to be described are those in which it was not required from the circumstances that interact with the children. So, my role in these instances was more of an observer than a participant and the observation was a semi-participant one.

Given its small sample size the findings of this research cannot be generalizable to a greater group. As for the findings, the exploratory nature of the research inhibits making definitive conclusions rather than provide insight (Streb, 2010, p. 372-374).

7. *Children´s tactics for asserting opportunities for agency - Two instances*

In the following presentation excerpts from the observations fieldnotes are described to illustrate the examples but also to bring the aforementioned theoretical framework closer to life in early childhood education. These two empirically based examples of children's activities and communication show how they try to attain, negotiate or defend personal autonomy and peer culture in relation to "the institutional routines and social

orders of the preschool" (Markström & Halldén, 2009, p. 115). Culture in all its forms emerges dialogically from everyday linguistic interactions that are themselves shaped by sociocultural formations (Ahearn, 2000, p. 13). The focus however is on the overall individual and collective tactics children utilize to create opportunities for agency: the tactics of silent avoidance, (verbal/non-verbal) refusal, (verbal/non-verbal) negotiation, coping, partial acceptance and solidarity (Markström & Halldén, 2009, p. 116; Punch, 2001, p. 10-17; Bae, 2009, p. 401). Concretely, delineated are children´s tactics of taking control and realising their own ideas about their individual activities by skipping the collective activities of the daily routine.

7.1 Example 1: The tactic of silent avoidance and verbal refusal

In the following instance, Rena, a four-year-old girl, and Spyros, a four-year-old boy are in the library 'reading' books.

They are playing "teacher and student" as Spyros is holding the book and showing the pictures to Rena who is sitting just in front of him paying remarkable attention to what he is saying. The door of the library is wide open and it leads directly to the main hall where all the children are getting dressed to go for the usual walk outside. They too are supposed to be getting ready. The educator reminds them it is time for the daily outdoor activity and tells them to put the books back on the shelf and join the others in getting ready. They both do not answer but continue the activity undisturbed without even looking at the speaking preschool teacher. Their

commitment to the activity is not questioned as they do not seem to be even slightly bothered by the noise caused in the hall while 25-30 children try to dress themselves. There is a shortage of educators this specific day as two of them are on a sick leave.

Educator: (the second time) Kids, I told you to come and get dressed as we want to go outside.

Rena: But we <u>don't</u> want to.

Spyros: Yeah, we <u>don't</u> to.

Educator: Oh really? And <u>what</u> do you want to do then?

Rena: Stay here and read books. *(Spyros affirmatively shakes his head).*

Educator: But we are going to read a book after lunch as usual.

Rena: But we want to read <u>now</u>.

Educator: Hmm, but now it is <u>not</u> a good time as we all are going out.

Rena: <u>Doooooch</u>! (*switching the language from Greek to German using the German emphatic particle to stress the contrast in their opinions*) It <u>is</u>.

The educator remains quiet for a while just looking at them and thinking, while the children do not look at her anymore and get instantly back to their activity.

This instance shows the tactics of silent avoidance and verbal refusal to resist participating in a collective activity they do not want to follow, i.e. outdoor activity. By 'pretending not to listen', 'not answering the question', and 'objecting strongly' they show

their competence for claiming space for their own opinion, ideas and preferences within this restricting context.

7.2 Continuation of example 1: Negotiation, coping and partial acceptance tactics

Educator: OK maybe it is but all the teachers are going to the playground with the other children and <u>no one</u> will be here with you.

Spyros: You can stay with us.

Preschool teacher: I must go out with the other children as two educators (*by name*) are not here today and we are not so many people to split up.

Rena: It's OK. We can stay alone.

Preschool teacher: Now <u>that</u> is something that <u>cannot</u> be done. If there is no one in the building you know you <u>cannot</u> just stay here alone the two of you.

Both children do not react to this argument as it is a general rule of the kindergarten.

Spyros: But we still want to read now. (*in a tone of complaint*)

Educator: Hmm, I wonder what we can do about it. What do you think?

Rena: Take it with us?

Educator: The book? That sounds like a solution. Do you think you can <u>read</u> outside?

Rena: Yeeeessss. (*already standing up*).

Spyros: *(a bit confused)* But also this we are <u>not</u> allowed to do.

Educator: I think this time we can try something new. What do you say?

Spyros: Yes. (*holding the book and heading to the hall*).

Negotiation as a tactic, is a part of children´s everyday interactions in early childhood education (Corsaro, 1997, in Markström & Halldén, 2009, p. 117). The previous section has outlined the scheduled children's use of time and space in this educational setting. This example shows how children actively engage in "negotiating the use of time and space and manage to create playspaces" of their own (Punch, 2000, p. 8). In doing so they defend their collective play, i.e. reading, regardless if it is happening in the 'wrong time' which they strongly feel is a 'good' one.

Also, they seem to be aware of the teacher´s social order and of the restriction imposed by the institution´s norms and collective routines. They know the rules and have accepted them, yet they bring interpretations in order to suggest possible solutions. In using the tactics of negotiation, coping and partial acceptance they are effective in being the joint decision maker on the matter concerning them as a group. They are successful in realizing their play idea and defending their agenda even if it is result of a new rule made up to suit this situation´s specific purpose.

7.3 Example 2: The tactic of silent avoidance, non-verbal refusal and negotiation

The aforementioned instance has also had different outcomes with different children. It is briefly described in the second instance which occurred in the same setting, with different teacher and on different days.

It is Monday and usually this day children bring their favourite toys from home to share with everyone. Pavlos is alone in the library and seems very engaged in making coloured paper airplanes on the table. His new robot toy (a gift from his father whom he misses a lot since the parents are recently separated) is lying on the table together with other two paper planes he has just constructed. The educator sees him, stops at the open door and reminds him of the upcoming outdoor activity and that he should join the other children in getting ready. He does not answer. The second time she enters the room and goes closer to him.

Educator: Pavlo, put your toys in your basket and come and dress yourself please. You can continue your play later. We are all heading to the playground now.

Pavlos does not respond again. He has not even looked at her. On the contrary, he continues constructing his fourth paper plane and as soon as finished he grabs everything and crawls to a corner under the table.

In this instance Pavlos seems to be effective in exercising agency utilizing the tactics of silent avoidance, negotiation and non-verbal refusal as a resource to defend his individual intention to skip the collective activity and adult's control.

7.4 Continuation of example 2: The tactic of solidarity

A group of children that have seen him interpret his behaviour to the educator.

Children: (*in an explanatory tone*) Pavlos does not want to come. He wants to play with his new four leg robot toy.

Two other girls go close to him and ask him (*in German*) what the reason he prefers staying than joining them is.

Girls: Pavlo, why don´t you want to come? Do you want to play with your robot?

Pavlos: (*in German*) Yes. I want to stay here and play with my new robot toy and my four planes.

The educator (*now in the room*) goes down on her knees looking at him. She does not try to pull him but she shows him with her finger the group of the already dressed children right across the door.

Educator: Pavlo, we are <u>all</u> going <u>out</u> now. You cannot stay alone upstairs. Stop playing and come with me (*stretching her hand to him*).

Tom (*with his toys in his hands and them crossed on his chest*) looks at her in the eyes and shakes his head in a negative response without saying a word. The educator waits for a while and after some minutes she leaves.

Children often try to help each other in different situations either by offering to perform an activity instead of their refusing peers (in Markström & Halldén, 2009, p. 117) or by interpreting their peers´ language (Bae, 2009, p.398). In this case the two girls interpret Pavlos' behaviour to the educator in an attempt to make his intention explicit. They feel empowered to advocate for their peer's right to his autonomous activity. This moment of "willingness to show solidarity" (Bae, 2009, p.401) in protecting his space for play is an important effort in establishing a different peer-culture in this institution.

8. *Discussion - Conclusion*

In this research children are viewed as capable, and their capabilities are observed as agency which are visible as displayed in their communication (Baraldi & Iervese, 2014, p. 3). As Mayall aptly describes, exploring children´s agency means paying attention to the differences made "to a relationship or to a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints" as children interact with others (Mayall, 2002, p. 21). The

findings of this research indicate that when limitations on children's intentions are imposed, they resist or challenge these limitations by using tactics they consider appropriate to influence issues that matter to them.

The ways in which children try to demonstrate their capability to shape their everyday life in this early childhood education context, by striving to take control over the course of an event responding in this way to adults' control, ranges from *refusal* to *partial acceptance* depending on children´s individual competencies and personality. In line with other relevant researches (Markström & Halldén, 2009; Punch, 2001; Bae, 2009) the analysis of each instance highlights six similar tactics on which children draw to claim agency by exercising autonomous choices: silent avoidance, (verbal/non-verbal) refusal, (verbal/non-verbal) negotiation, coping, partial acceptance and solidarity. These tactics deployed were not accident; children utilized them to avoid conforming to instructions or to develop their own culture. However, they do not always bring the same results.

Analysed in terms of the theoretical perspectives, different tactics have different consequences for children's agency negotiation. The two examples described highlight an interesting tactic for children's agency: *negotiation*. As Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie refer to in a large-scale study on negotiation within the family ordered by the Flemish children's rights commissioner, negotiation emerges as "an educational norm that needs to be stimulated" which is very evident in these instances as well. Their research findings seem to indicate that negotiations on different topics happen more often from parents with their children than the reverse (Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De

Bie, 2006, p. 136-137). However, in these instances, it is the children who negotiate with the institution´s social order both verbally and non-verbally. Firstly, by suggesting alternative solutions to seemingly impossible situations, such as staying alone in the building or claiming that one educator stays upstairs only for them so they do not interrupt their activity; secondly, by hiding under the table or using the body language to manifest their opposition to what the adult is trying to control. The manifestations of the aforementioned tactics, i.e. play, body language, verbal/non-verbal communication, facial expressions, tone of voice, the specific word choice, are to be understood and interpreted as children's own views, as their modes of expression of preferences, and demonstration of their understanding of the environment and of their attempts to successfully change the structure of it.

Interpreted in terms of the theoretical framework, children view themselves as competent to negotiate their contribution to institution's norms and rules, and also negotiate in order to have some time and space of their own. By negotiating the way, they relate to the institution, represented here by the adult educators (Esse, 2015, in Esser, Baader, Betz, & Hungerland , 2016, p.12), they question their authority and negotiate their social status within this institutional context. As Gulløv aptly describes it:

Negotiations over the nature of relations, the question of authority and the degree of intimacy between adults and children are a constant art of the day-care setting,

pointing, I argue, to a general cultural negotiation of the generational order and social status of childhood (Gulløv, 2003, p. 31).

What these two instances also show is that when children's opportunities for agency exhibition are facilitated, children develop social competences such as negotiate, compromise, deal with success and failure, and develop resilience (Macfrlane & Cartmel, 2008 in Mashford-Scott & Church, 2011, p. 15). Because the educators in both cases were dialogically responsive towards their verbal and non-verbal communication, either by negotiating back or by relinquishing their power, a space is created where the children can express their "voices" and it can be argued that the educators themselves take a child's point of view (Bae, 2009, p. 399).

Furthermore, regarding the second instance, children´s tactics for personal agency should not be seen only from a perspective of generational ordering and equalized either to resistance (Ahearn, 2001, p. 115) or viewed as "rebelliousness towards structures established by adults" (Esser, Baader, Betz, & Hungerland, 2016, p. 4). They should be understood within the context of this early childhood institution: on the one hand, here children are viewed as subjects in their own right, entitled to freedom of expression; on the other hand, they are members of groups and are expected to take part in various organised collective activities. In the first instance the exercise of collective agency might be interpreted as an act of compliance with institution's order rather than as individual freedom. Importantly, as children interpret each situation within institution´s culture of routinized activities their understanding and estimation of their capabilities to

produce effects is evident. This is notion of perceived self-efficacy[4] is central in the work of Bandura as arguably the most central mechanism of *agency* (Bandura, 2001, p. 10).

A challenge when researching with children is that it is unlikely that an adult researcher will ever fully comprehend the world from a child's perspective (Punch, 2002, p. 325). Another challenge always is how to describe the interactions so that the persons involved in the research do not feel "textualized" but respected and appreciated (Tobin and Davidson, 1990, p. 278, in Bae, 2009, p. 402).

Punch's research in Bolivia indicates that the opportunistic way in which children utilize a great variety of strategies to assert autonomy varies, "not according to sex, but according to the particular competencies, personality and birth order of individual children" (Punch, 2001, p. 18). Nevertheless, an interesting point to be further expounded would be the differences in the strategies used by children in this same arena based on their age, sex, ethnicity, social class etc. and when and how they become empowering (Markström & Halldén, 2009, p. 115). Moreover, as no formal interviews with educators were conducted, no conclusion can be made on how they, as practitioners, perceive these interactions. Lastly, the reflections of this paper might draw on an ongoing study about children's agency in early childhood education becoming part of a larger project.

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[4] Perceived Self-Efficacy: An individual's belief in her/his capabilities to produce effects by her/his actions (Bandura, 2001, p. 10).

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9. *Appendices*

10.1 Conversation 1: Rena and Spyros

They are used to spending time together and doing different activities because their parents are also friends, so they meet often outside the kindergarten. Rena is much more talkative then Spyros, more articulate and often has strong opinion about her preferences. Most of the time they speak almost simultaneously but since Rena's answer are longer, the conversation is facilitated. The book reading activity usually happens after lunch time. Children are asked to decide whether they want to read a book or relax in another room. Usually both of the children enjoy both activities.

F: I think I saw you two reading a book at the playground. Is that true?

S: Yes. We did.

R: Did you see us? We took a book at the playground. (*Both smiling and quite happy with the fact*).

F: That has never happened before. How was it?

S: Good.

R: It was very good. You know, we wanted to read and the educator (*calling her by name*) said we can read at the playground.

F: Why would she say that? Isn't there a rule for the books?

S: But, she did say it is ok.

R: She said so because.... because we didn't want to go outside with the others.

F: How so?

S: We wanted to read books. You know, (*turning my head with his hand toward his direction to have my full attention since at that instance I was looking at Rena*) I brought a book from home and I wanted to read it to Rena. It is about dinosaurs.

F: Wow! That's interesting! I want you to read it to me as well later.

(*laughing*)

F: But don't we usually read books after lunch, at relax time?

R: Yes, but we wanted to read now (*Stressing the word now with her voice while pounding her foot on the floor. And confusing the now and then.*)

F: When do you mean?

R: Before

F: OK. So, what did you do?

R: We said the educator (*by name*) we didn't want to and she said we can take the book with us.

F: You mean she said right away it is ok for you to take the book?

S: In the beginning, she didn't want to.

F: What didn't she want to?

S: That we stay alone here.

R: Yes, because no one can stay alone in the building.

F: That is the rule, you are right.

Pause...

F: So, are you going to read a book after lunch as well or you want to do something else?

S: No, we want to relax afterwards.

R: Yes, we want to relax.

F: You do like doing both, don't you?

R: Yes, and now that we have read the book we can relax.

S: Yeeeesss. (*laud*)

(*looking at each other and laughing*)

F: And what do you do if someone tells you to do something you don't want to?

S: We leave. (*he laughs*)

R: I say 'I d o n ' t w a n t to !!' (*marking every word*)

F: And then? If that doesn't work?

R: I cry.

S: I tell my dad.

F: And what does your dad say?

S: He says it's ok. I can do later.

10.2 Conversation 2: Pavlos

His parents are recently separated and he spends the weekends with him. His mood is always weird on Mondays and he often ask for his mother. Inside the building, in the main area before lunch time.

F: Hey, did you have fun playing with your robot?

P: Yeah. (*shaking his head and smiling*)

F: Where is it now?

P: It's in my basket. (*showing toward it*)

F: You can play with it now till we have lunch. You have time.

P: No. I played enough. I want to play blocks now.

F: How come you didn't go outside?

P: Because I didn't want to. I simply didn't want to. (*while lifting his shoulders*)

F: How so?

P: I think it is boring.

F: But usually you love going outdoor playing football.

P: Yes, normally I do but today I wanted to play with my new four-legged robot that my dad gave me as a present this weekend that I spent at his place. You know it is the new one and has four legs and I made four planes for each leg so he can also fly.

F: Wow! Sounds amazing!

Pause...

F: Is there a reason that you hid yourself under the table?

P: I didn't hide myself. Everyone could see me. I just didn't want to come. (*In this kindergarten children often use the under-table area when they want a bit of privacy. They often fill it with cushions and develop play situations there.*)

F: But did you tell anyone that you prefer not come?

P: Hmmm.... No. (not sure) I didn't tell anyone from the educators. I just told Damien (his close friend).

F: What did he say?

P: He said that he wants to play with my robot as well and that we should take it with us outside.

F: That could be a plan. What did you answer?

P: We are not allowed to take our toys outside. (*That is a general rule of the kindergarten*) My dad worked very hard to buy that for me. I have to take good care of it.

F: OK. But why didn't you tell any from the educators you prefer staying?

P: Cause you (*meaning all the educators*) wouldn't let me.

F: Why do you think we wouldn't?

P: Cause, it was time for playground and everyone was going out.

F: So, it was not the right time?

P: I don't know.

F: But I didn't hear you say a word to the educator. How could she know what you want?

P: The girls told her.

Yes. But you didn't. Don't we use our words to say things we want?

P: I was sad.

F: So, you heard her but you didn't want to answer?

P: Yes.

F: Did any educator stay with you upstairs?

P: No. I was alone here. I can stay on my own. I am a big boy. At my dad's place, I do stay alone when he takes out the garbage. And everything's fine. (*Actually, he was not left. He was supervised by the chief of the kindergarten who was working in her office, which is another room in the same area.*)

F: What if other kids next time don't want to go out? What should we do then?

P: Then they should stay. We should all stay and go to the playground later before our parents come to pick us up (*which is actually something that happens from time to time depending on the weather conditions and the shortage on staff*).

F: But that means we skip relax time?

P: We can do it also another time.

Other children started to influence the conversation so the documenting stopped about here.

10.3 Semi-structured informal conversation

The following questions are prepared beforehand to be asked but they can change during the interview according to children interaction to the fieldworker.

1. Why didn't you want to go outside?
2. What did you want to do instead?
3. What about the schedule?
4. How could it be made possible?

5. Why do you think the educator acted this way?

6. What do you think other kids should do when they don't want to go out?

10.4 The library area

A cozy private spot for reading with a carpeted two level area. Low, open faced shelves, easy accessible that feature books about the themes being studied. Many colourful cushions and a stripped rug.

Stuffed animals, puppets, persona dolls related to the books available in the corner. Materials for active involvement in storybook reading and storytelling, magnetic board with story pictures, CD player for listening to music and taped stories. Poster and other bulletin boards displayed on the wall.

There is also a writing area with magnetic letters, puzzles, and other teacher made materials. Blackboard with chalks available, a blue round table with children-size chairs. Each area accommodates 4-5 children, is obvious and inviting but also afford privacy and is clearly defined. Children frequently engage in activities of retelling stories. There is wooden box with approximately 20 books recently borrowed from the public library. A bulletin board alphabet train in a wavy motion, showing sound-symbol-picture relationship of letters is displayed on the wall followed by a rhyme which children often use to say while simulating with their hand the movement of the train.

10.5 Research study consent form

Research Project Title:

Asserting Agency: Children´s Tactics to navigate in Early Childhood Education

<u>**Consent Form**</u>

Dear parent,

Free University of Berlin attaches high priority to the ethical conduct of this research. I therefore ask you to consider the following points before signing this form. Your signature confirms that you allow your child to participate in the study.

Thank you in advance,

1. I have had details of the study explained to me by the researcher herself.

2. My questions and concerns about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

3. I agree for my child to be observed during his play and participate in an informal conversation about these observations. And I do give my consent for this information to be documented in written in the study.

4. I am aware that I am free to withdraw my child from the study at any time.

5. The reference to my child will be done anonymously, by excluding names and other identifying details.

6. I would like my information: (circle your option) **a)** returned to me **b)** returned to my family   **c)** other (please specify) …………………………………………….

7.   I consent / do not consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study to be used for any other research purposes. (Please, delete what does <u>not</u> apply).

Participant's   Parent   Name:

_____

Participant's   Parent   Signature:

_____

Date: /   /

Contact   details: _____

_____

_____

_____

Research conducted by:

Lekkai Ina, February, 2016

Researcher's Signature: _____