

Chapter Six: Teacher Stuff

We come down and do our work and then they go and do teacher stuff that doesn't respond to us like the program. (J, 14p9)

Introduction

The previous chapter provided insights into some of the organisational aspects of the Preparatory Year, which frame the lived experiences of Preparatory aides. Importantly, the aides' stories reveal the significance of the contextual relationship between the principal and school staff's perception of the Preparatory Year, and the aides' sense of value and belonging to both their class and the whole school setting. This chapter turns to a more personal focus as I explore the aides' experiences of their pedagogical role, including the nature of their relationships in the classroom.

The relational nature of their work in the classroom was highly significant. The Preparatory aides did not work alone. Their role encompassed working with a Preparatory teacher and children. In some cases, Preparatory aides worked with more than one class or teacher. Parents of the Preparatory Year children were also part of this interpersonal context.

Chapter Six opens with an exploration of the aides' experiences of the new role on which they had embarked. It turns then to how they navigated and learnt the role and issues faced along the way. Finally, this chapter explores how the expectations of the aides and their perceptions of their teaching partner's expectations of the aides' role affected their relationship and daily practice.

Role of Preparatory Aides

Unlike general teacher aides, who often work across year levels with numerous teachers, Preparatory aides support the Preparatory teachers and work within the Preparatory classes only. This model was based on the previous Queensland state preschool provision of a working team of a full-time teacher and teacher aide per class.

Data generation for this study commenced in 2007, the same year as the Preparatory Year was introduced. Although trials were held across Queensland for three years prior to 2007, there were conflicting reports about the role of the Preparatory aide. Different schools utilised aides in different ways and for different hours, and work practices varied greatly. Perceptions of the role of the Preparatory aide varied among principals, teachers, parents, children and aides. Although it would be interesting to consider all of these voices, this study is confined to the Preparatory aides' lived experiences.

The aides' stories outlined in Chapter Six revealed a variance of hours, job allocations and resource provisions. The aides' perceptions of the organisational structure of their role often mismatched the reality in which they found themselves. This chapter explores the aides' stories of their pedagogical role: the *teacher staff*. I begin this section with the aides' perceptions of the role as they moved into Preparatory classrooms.

Perceptions of the role

Underpinning this research is the ontological belief that reality is complex and varied, and informed by personal perceptions (Glesne & Peshkin, 1991; Lavery, 2003; van Manen, 1990), and, as individuals, we construct our knowledge relationally with the world. The aides came to their new role with varied life experiences, values and dispositions. If we draw upon the metaphor of ropes and knots to represent the aides and their experiences, we can see that, just as each rope differs according to the braided or twisted yarns or fibres, the aides all bring with them their own understandings, positions and experiences. All the aides in this study were mothers—one a grandmother. Some had many years' experience working in schools; one had none. Some were keen to take up the role of a Preparatory aide, and others felt this was a last chance to remain employed at the school. Their prior life experiences contextualised their perception of the role and informed their construction of knowledge concerning their role.

To work as a teacher aide in a Preparatory class, all the participants in my study needed to move into the Preparatory sector of the school and build knowledge and understanding of early childhood pedagogical principles and practices. Making the move into Preparatory classes posed a significant risk for each of the aides. As identified above, they were all mothers, most with dependent children living at home.

Although they all had a general idea of what to expect when working with young children, all six aides faced the challenge of learning a new role when they commenced employment in their school as a Preparatory aide.

Initial role adoption

Leanne's school was involved in the Preparatory Year trials from 2005, and Leanne was employed as the Preparatory aide for this trial. Leanne came to this position holding the equivalent of Certificate III qualifications in Children's Services and previous experience as a kindergarten assistant. This enabled her to transition into this new role fairly smoothly. She was assigned to one class and worked with a very experienced early childhood teacher.

Sally began employment as a Preparatory aide at the same time as the school opened a Preparatory class. There had not been a preschool at her school prior to 2007. The school administration team and teaching staff were not used to having four- and five-year-old children in the grounds. Although Sally had no formal training or experience, the Preparatory teacher with whom Sally worked was a very experienced, well-regarded early childhood teacher.

Amanda, Bec, Dianne and Jacqui had had previous experience working as general aides within their same school prior to the commencement of the Preparatory Year. Dianne had worked as a support aide with children with additional needs and had the equivalent to Certificate III qualifications in Learning Support. Jacqui had worked as an administrative and general classroom aide for a few years, as well as working casually as a relief assistant in early childhood centres. Amanda and Bec had worked in the preschool class of their school for one and two years, respectively.

It became evident that Amanda, Bec and Dianne were unhappy as general aides and so were keen to move to the new Preparatory aide position. Prior to her work with preschool children, Amanda had worked with Year 1 classes for seven years. She moved into a preschool class for one year before a Preparatory class commenced in her school. Her conversations about her previous experience in Year 1 classes highlighted the sense of fragmentation and detachment she experienced when performing general aide duties:

Friday mornings were always so busy because you're trying to mark the homework and trying to hear the kids' words ... [the teacher I was scheduled with for the next class] came in and said 'You're late! What were you doing?' Oh what do you think? I was over in the staffroom with my feet up having a cup of coffee. Where do you think I was? I said I had one more book to mark. I just wanted to get this last book done. 'You were five minutes late!' [she said]. I said 'No, I'm not. I'm actually only three minutes late'. It actually blew the crap out of me (A, 1p23); and

Being in Grade 1, we had three classes and I was always jumping from class to class and not really building a relationship with the kids. (A, 1p2)

Amanda was glad to move away from a role that required her to work across a range of classes. Like Amanda, Dianne was also used to *going from classroom to classroom* (D, 1p10) in her previous role as a support aide for children with additional needs within the school. She explained: *It could be a half an hour in a classroom and you could do x number of classrooms in a day. Or you might have an hour block ... So it has been a change to come to Prep* (D, 1p10).

Bec had the most experience as a general aide and had worked at the school for 14 years before moving to the position of teacher aide in a preschool room, then Preparatory. She explained:

I used to work with the big kids, [Grades] 5, 6 and 7 ... used to do the sport, used to coach, do everything, do the sports days, be the chief judge ... I used to do a lot then but then I wasn't happy with the school and so it was a decision to either leave or you step sideways. (B, 14p4)

Bec's story suggested that she drew connection with the school through her sporting leadership role. This may have sustained her commitment to the school. However, she was unhappy with the lack of acknowledgement she received as a teacher aide as well as the extra workload. So, she chose to make the move to preschool, then the Preparatory class, where she hoped she would be more valued.

Bec saw the opening of a preschool within the school as an opportunity for change. She explained: *I came down ... I hated little kids before that but I came down here* (B, 14p4). Interestingly, even though she had no connection or interest in young children, Bec believed she needed to make this shift, or leave the school. When Bec reflected on making the shift, she recalled: *It was the toughest year out of all the years* (B, 14p5).

Reflecting upon the move, Bec found the shift into the preschool more difficult than the later shift into a Preparatory class. Previously, Bec had worked with a variety of teachers, but her move into preschool resulted in her working with one teacher. Building and maintaining a close teaching partnership with one teacher would not have occurred when she was a general aide. Her incidental social contact with other staff members would have been significantly reduced in preschool. Bec was used to working with children across many of the senior classes in both class time and on the sports fields, but in preschool she was contained to one class of 25 four- and five-year-old children. Bec had identified that she did not enjoy being with young children, so her concern about working with and relating to young children would have been a significant factor. Importantly, these would have been the same obstacles to face had she moved from primary classes straight into a Preparatory class. This was a significant change in role, and she was apprehensive about this. However, Bec was not alone.

The move into Preparatory classes presented significant challenges for most of the aides in this study. Taking on the role of a Preparatory aide in the first years of the rollout of the Preparatory Year in Queensland was difficult and perplexing. The ambiguity of the role was a major issue: *Where is the list of duties? Where is the job outline? What are you supposed to be doing?* (D, 3p6). Dianne struggled with the vagueness of her role. She worked across three classrooms with three teachers but was not rostered with a particular class or teacher for any set time. It was left up to Dianne to ask which tasks had to be done and in which order. She found the lack of structure around her role difficult and frustrating.

When asked to select a photograph to represent their early experiences in a Preparatory class, three of the four aides involved in this data-collection exercise chose the knotted, tangled ropes (see Figure 9). Jacqui, who had worked casually in a range of early childhood settings, explained: *I felt I was thrown in the shark pit, that's how I felt! ... at the beginning I felt like my stomach was in knots and I went home every day and cried* (J, 16p4). Sally agreed and recalled:

I felt like I didn't know what I was doing ... am I doing this right? Am I supposed to be here or am I supposed to be there? [I was] very confused, [I felt] very much all poured into one bucket and I wasn't too sure if I was doing the right thing, so yes definitely a bit like muddled up. (S, 10p3)

Reflecting back on when she first started as Preparatory aide, Sally explained: *I was unsure. There was so much to learn and I was unsure of how much to actually do or give* (S, 10p3).



Figure 9: Alex Skelly (2006). *Knotted rope*.

During the photo representation exercise, I asked Sally to choose a photo to symbolise her early experiences as a Preparatory aide. She selected the image of the coiled rope with the working end feeding out of the coil (see Figure 10). She commented on her selection: *A little bit out is probably what I did gradually. It was gradually feeding out what I needed to do* (S, 10p3).

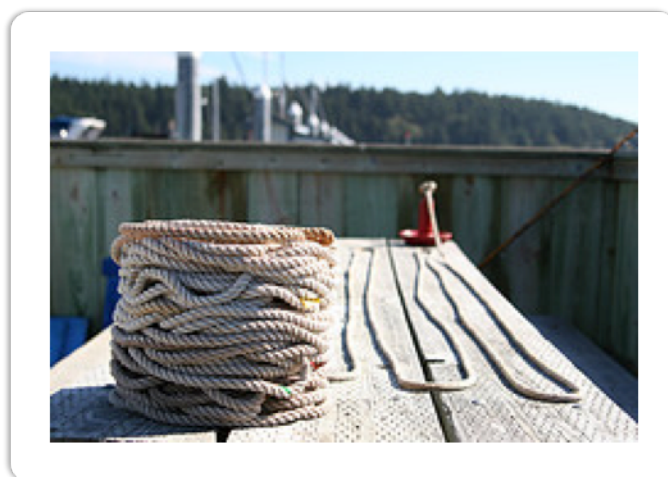


Figure 10: Librarianguish (2006). *Rope*.

The aides' recollections exposed a raw insecurity about their role in the Preparatory class. Their stories revealed their nervousness about not knowing what was expected of them in their role.

Without qualifications or experience in the early childhood sector, most of the aides drew solely from their own personal life experience and dispositions to meet the challenge of a new role. Dianne was a mother of four teenage children, all of whom had attended kindergarten and preschool. Although she was familiar with these early childhood contexts, she had neither early childhood qualifications nor professional experience in early childhood settings. Dianne struggled to understand her role. She bemoaned: *I feel like I'm drawing more on my experience as a mother working in the Prep classrooms than what I am as an aide* (D, 1p44). Although Dianne had undertaken study in learning support and had many years of experience working with and supporting teachers, she believed that the role of a Preparatory aide was akin to mothering, and she drew on her maternal skills and dispositions more than her previous work experience.

Amanda concurred with Dianne, and responded: *You are a mother figure* (A, 1p44). Bec, a mother and grandmother, commented that the role was *all instinctive* (B, 3p6). The aides saw strong correlations between their role as mothers and their role as Preparatory aides. Dianne wondered if others would be able to undertake the role *if you haven't had children yourself?* (D, 3p6). This conversation from the first synergetic focus group demonstrated the strong positioning of the aides' role as maternal:

Dianne: *I would hate to be an aide put into a Prep classroom that ... doesn't have children.*

Amanda: *You'd be silly to put them in.*

Dianne: *Well you would.* (D, 1p43)

Importantly, Dianne and Bec not only drew upon their own maternal skills, they believed that being a mother was a prerequisite to the role.

Dianne was also concerned that many new graduate teachers were being placed in classrooms without teaching experience, or the experience of being a mother: *There are teachers that go into Prep rooms that don't have children and haven't taught in Prep*

classrooms (D, 1p43). Her statement denoted the high value she placed upon maternal skills and experience. Leanne offered an insight into the importance of maternal skills taking preference over formal qualifications. She explained: *Our young new graduate last year ... was first year out when she got put in there [Prep] last year. Her aide was a qualified teacher who hadn't taught in many years but was a mother, sort of older than me* (L, 1p43). While this aide held teaching qualifications, Leanne's perception was that she was located in the Preparatory class because of her maternal life experience, and that these skills would be most valuable for the new teacher and class.

These conversations revealed the identification of the aides' role as both maternal and instinctive. The aides' discussions reiterated the problem of maternal discourses that position work with children as natural and instinctive. Research suggests that this issue is a fundamental stumbling block to professionalisation (O'Connell, 2011; Sims, 2007; Stonehouse, 1994) because it leads to the undervaluing of professional qualifications in the early childhood sector. It can be seen that many of the aides viewed formal qualifications as less necessary than maternal experience.

A learned, not maternal, role

Leanne, a mother of two grown-up children, perceived her professional experience and prior study as a great asset to her current role. Leanne differed from the other participants because she had completed the equivalent of a Certificate III in Children's Services before she commenced work in a kindergarten. This was a regulated qualification for assistants in kindergartens and childcare centres in Queensland under the *Child Care Regulation 2003* (Qld), and now a minimum requirement for all educators working under the *Education and Care Services National Law 2010* (Cth) and *Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011* (Cth). Although the move from a community kindergarten into a Preparatory classroom in a school setting was a significant change for her, Leanne's knowledge, sense of capability and understanding of the role were fundamental to her successful transition. She felt that her qualifications and experience generally matched the expectations of the new role. *The only thing that has really changed for me is that certain expectations are different when we've got to put things on paper. I've probably got to make more observations and things like that for the teacher* (L, 2p33). Importantly, Leanne had gained knowledge of a range of observational methods from her study and previous experience. She had a solid

understanding of the pedagogical aspects of her role: *I knew a few tricks and I knew how to do the basic sort of stuff* (L, 2p2). Leanne epitomised someone with prior understanding of working with four-year-old children. She had the most experience as an early childhood aide in this study, and did not perceive the role as ambiguous.

In summary, Leanne acknowledged the difficulty that others would have faced without underpinning skills and practice: *If I walked straight into that classroom five years ago without my previous experience I would have been up the creek* (L, 2p2). Leanne's comment indicates that she would have found the role difficult to navigate without prior experience and specialised professional knowledge.

A qualified role

At the time of data collection, Preparatory aides in Queensland Catholic schools or Queensland state schools were not required to have qualifications. Although some schools favoured applicants with Certificate III level qualifications in Children's Services or Education Support or the equivalent, it was not mandatory. The lack of necessary qualifications added weight to the view of the teacher aides' role as maternal and unprofessional. It also further marginalised Preparatory aides from other educators working with four-year-old children in kindergarten and childcare settings where Certificate III level qualifications were mandatory. Leanne believed that the Catholic Education Office did not require qualifications because of the expense of remuneration. She told the other aides:

They will never make us all do Certificate III because if they make us all do Certificate III it will cost them. If they can get away with us not doing it and Cath Ed in that way are a law unto themselves, they won't make us do it. (L, 1p41)

Before she moved into Preparatory, Dianne had completed a Certificate III in Education Support, and she worked across the school supporting children with additional needs. When the Preparatory Year was introduced in 2007, Dianne nominated to work with the Preparatory class. At the first meeting in 2007, Dianne disclosed that:

He [the principal] would discourage a Prep person from doing the Certificate III because he is saying a Prep job is a Level 2 aide and I've been told, you know when it [Prep] was coming out, well I don't know what I'm going to be

doing because you are being overpaid for the position, because I'm a Level 3.
(D, 1p47)

This statement shocked me, and the other aides in the conversation. These comments reveal that, not only did the principal not understand the importance of the Preparatory aide position professionally and pedagogically, he also placed little value upon staff improving knowledge and skills. His remarks illustrated the perception that working with young children requires little training or knowledge and correlated closely with the problem of maternal discourses discussed earlier in this study.

When Sally commenced her employment as a Preparatory aide with no previous experience, she also began studying towards a Certificate III in Children's Services. While this would equip her with pedagogical knowledge for her role, her primary reason for undertaking this study was strategically designed to provide job security: *I've chosen to do the Certificate III in Child Services only because I can actually then walk away if things aren't what I'd like them to be* (S, p50). Sally understood that, if she left the school sector, she would need this qualification to work with young children. However, Sally continued in the Preparatory classrooms at the same school and, after completing her study, she enrolled in a Bachelor of Education with Early Childhood specialisation. This study would eventually lead to Sally becoming a qualified teacher. However, she saw enormous benefit in undertaking this study while working as a Preparatory aide. She believed that the teacher and children benefited from her current and developing knowledge, and she could practice skills within the classroom under the supervision of the teacher.

In contrast, Dianne had previously completed a Certificate III in Education Support, and had worked across the school supporting children with additional needs for many years, but she did not view this knowledge as relevant for her position in the Preparatory Year. She struggled to find professional development opportunities to support the development of specific skills pertinent to her new role as Preparatory aide: *There is nothing you can do that I know of for the jobs that we are doing* (D, 1p52). Dianne primarily perceived both the role and training opportunities indistinct and unclear, and she relied on her maternal skill set.

The combined issues of role ambiguity, and lack of access to and valuing of professional development and training identified by Dianne were captured in Lewis's

2005 study of teacher aides' perceptions of their role. At various points in my study, Dianne struggled to understand her role and was frustrated by the lack of opportunity and support to develop and hone specialist skills. At the first focus group meeting, she asked:

What do you do? If you want to be an aide to go and work in a Prep classroom, what [training] is out there? What do you do? Because what you are offered within the school [for professional development] at the moment is nothing. (D, 1p44)

Dianne complained that there was little professional development opportunity for aides.

During the Queensland Preparatory Year trials, a number of professional development opportunities were offered. Leanne commenced her position in a Preparatory class at the beginning of the trial. She explained that initially there was professional development offered by the Catholic Education Office for teachers and aides, as well as in-school support offered to teachers. However, as the trial expanded, support was harder to access. Leanne recalled:

There was an Ed Queensland lady who was sort of in charge of this area and ... then as the trial schools got bigger and bigger we saw her less and less ... this year she is gone ... her job doesn't exist because the trial has finished. (L, 1p45)

Leanne commented that she was informed and encouraged to attend professional development:

We get told about any PD happening ... we all put up our hand and most times we get to go unless we've been to heaps. We're told about it and you say what you want to go to and it goes to the principal. Most of us I think get to go to at least two lots of PD a year plus on some student-free days we have people come in. (L, 2p42)

Leanne's principal realised the value of promoting professional development, and facilitated participation in school time at school expense. Leanne's perception was that the teachers and principal understood the significance of building the capacity of the Preparatory team. Leanne acknowledged that she was fortunate to have commenced work with a teacher and principal who were both very proactive about maximising the benefits of the Preparatory Year and the knowledge of staff. Leanne benefited from attending professional development sessions, and affirmed the importance of this,

stating that: *whatever your teachers go to, you should go to a modified version of it or go together to some things* (L, 2p52). Leanne's inclusion in professional development not only afforded her the opportunity to build her skills and knowledge, but also contributed to her sense of connection with the rest of the teaching team. Her sense of belonging and engagement within the Preparatory classroom was strong. However, Leanne's experience differed markedly from that of the other aides in this study.

Marginalising knowledge

The lack of access to professional development was common to most of the other aides in this study. Jacqui had worked alongside teachers in a variety of early childhood settings, and within the same school for a few years. She was perplexed at why she was not included in professional discussions and development at the school. She wondered: *I don't know if they think well, you don't get paid for that, or it's not your responsibility or why should you get to know about that because you're not a teacher?* (J, 15p12).

Dianne thought it was unfair that: *the teachers went to all these days of in-services and all these different things and everybody around here is saying well it is a joint relationship and you are sharing these jobs and all this sort of stuff. But hang on, she's had all this*

Sally: *Training?*

Dianne: *and where do you go? What is out there?* (D, 1p44)

Jacqui and Dianne's comments exposed the divide between the teachers and the aides. Despite the fact that many of the tasks are the same for both teachers and aides in Preparatory classes, the teachers at their schools were the ones who received the training. The aides were excluded from professional development, marginalising their role professionally and pedagogically, and silencing their voice. The next time we met, she repeated: *This professional development I think is very wanting. I haven't seen anything* (D, 2p42). Dianne also perceived that she may not have been informed: *Maybe I'm not shown anything* (D, 2p42).

Dianne and Amanda explained that, although they were aware of one workshop opportunity for aides working in Preparatory classes in 2006, they could not attend

because the principal would not replace them. Not only did their comment reiterate the problem of silence and marginalisation raised earlier, it also raised concern about the value of professional knowledge.

An excerpt from the second synergetic focus group conversation in 2007 illustrated the marked difference in perspectives towards professional development at Leanne and Dianne's schools:

Dianne: I went to a [language workshop] the other day but I wasn't replaced so the Prep rooms just did without.

Leanne: We are always replaced. That is ridiculous.

Dianne: They just do without. Well the choice is I go or I don't go.

Sally: No, that is not right.

Leanne: [Your principal] really needs to get his act together...

Dianne: Teachers are replaced because teachers have to be replaced. Last year [when working as a learning support aide] if I was away I would have been replaced ... if I was away I had to be replaced because those children couldn't function; they couldn't be there. But [this year] that's too bad. (D, 2p42)

Dianne's remarks in this conversation revealed her frustration, and illustrated the lack of support she received from the principal for improving her professional knowledge. Even though the principal released her, not replacing her meant that the Preparatory teachers and children were disadvantaged. The adult-child ratio was severely compromised. Although Dianne did not comment about how she felt about this, in practical terms, this could have resulted in Dianne feeling guilty for wanting to attend professional development, marginalising her from the Preparatory Year teachers. If she did feel guilty about disrupting the classrooms, this could also reduce the chance of Dianne wanting to participate in professional development again.

As revealed by their voices throughout this chapter, at various stages throughout this study, all of the aides expressed confusion about their role in the Preparatory Year and were disgruntled with the lack of professional support to help them build an understanding of their role. Their experiences reflected the literature that showed that teacher aides were marginalised from professional development and support (Finn &

Pannozzo, 2004; Gerber et al., 2001; Godwin, 1977; Johnson & Faunce, 1973; Lewis, 2005).

Lewis (2005) noted that teacher aides felt they learnt the skills and knowledge required for their role from observing and working alongside teachers. However, this also proved difficult for the aides in my study. There was a new role, resulting from a major educational reform. I turn to this issue now.

A new pedagogical role

When the Preparatory Year commenced, the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006) was used in Queensland Preparatory classes. This curriculum advocated a holistic view of the child as a capable and competent social learner. Building relationships and acknowledging children's diverse social and cultural understandings were pivotal pedagogical principles in this play-based curriculum. Although educators with early childhood qualifications and/or experience would have been au fait with the underpinning philosophy and practices of these guidelines, the same could not be said for other educators working outside the field.

Most of the aides' teachers had had little experience in early childhood classes prior to teaching in Preparatory classes. Additionally, most of the aides in this study came into Preparatory classes without prior knowledge or experience of an early childhood curriculum. Unlike the experience of the aides reported by Lewis (2005), learning the required skills and knowledge from their teachers was problematic for most of the aides in my study. Just understanding the curriculum principles would have presented a challenge for the aides and teachers alike. As a result, many of the aides in my study were excluded from strong pedagogical mentoring or modelling, as well as professional development.

At the first synergetic focus group meeting, the conversation turned to a discussion about the aides' understanding of the Preparatory curriculum:

Dianne: It is not structured in a way that you are sitting down reading, writing and doing all that sort of stuff. It is more general how to get on with people, relationship building.

Leanne: Social skills is huge in Prep. (L, 1p44)

The aides shared the viewpoint that the Preparatory curriculum was designed to support children's entry into the formal school setting: *Teaching them social skills, if they are interested in reading and writing you extend that but you're just getting them ready to come into that formal situation* (B, 15p14). Although their understanding reflected some of the guiding principles and pedagogy of the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006), some of the aides felt at odds with their perceptions of the teachers' interpretations of the expectations of the guidelines.

Interpreting the curriculum

Difficulties arose for the aides when they perceived that the teachers' interpretation of the curriculum differed from their own: *It is more structured. I don't really play with the children because we are doing all that [formal desk work]. I mean you talk to them and everything else but I don't have any time for [play]* (D, 2p30). The issue of the place of play in the program was raised often throughout this study. The aides struggled with contradictions they saw between the significance of play and the reality of what was happening in their classrooms:

It started off as play based ... I have been working since it started and I would probably count on less than one hand the number of times I have sat down on the floor and actually played with the kids. (D, 3p4)

When I first met Sally, she had only been employed in her role for six months. Yet, she was forthright in her explanations about the importance of the role of play in the Preparatory curriculum. At the second synergetic focus group meeting, in June 2007, Sally (previously a banker) explained: *We are definitely play-based curriculum ... We are still surprised at the other teachers in the school who ask us what unit we are doing this term. They don't understand about the play-based curriculum* (S, 2p25). Sally worked with a very experienced early childhood teacher, who had shared knowledge extensively with her. Although her experience correlated with Lewis's (2005) study, which found that aides learnt pedagogical skills and practices from observing the teacher, most of the aides did not have the benefit of working alongside a teacher with early childhood expertise. This minimised the opportunity for the aides to observe and learn sound early childhood theories and pedagogical practices from their teaching partners.

However, the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2011) presented more challenges. When the draft *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2010) was released in 2010, many principals and teachers, including some involved in this study, decided to implement the maths and English content for the Preparatory Year from this trial curriculum. All the schools in this study were implementing the revised *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2011) in 2011. The aides were not sure whether this decision was made by the teacher or principal, and were further confused and conflicted by the incongruity between their understandings of the Preparatory Year and daily classroom practice. A discussion between the aides at a group meeting in 2010 highlighted this confusion:

Leanne: *There's a bit of disagreement I suppose because she keeps saying 'it has to be done this way because this is what is expected next year with the National Curriculum' and I just cringe sometimes because I think this is not what it's all about.*

Sally: *But that's not this year.*

Dianne: *The National Curriculum is not in.*

Sally: *Nobody knows.*

Leanne: *No, we're getting ready because it's in next year. (L, 3p4)*

The aides often grappled with their perceptions of the teachers' interpretations of the curriculum: *I find it a challenge how they are teaching the kids and they don't play (B, 15p8)*. This led to further confusion and conflict for the aides. I was curious to learn about the aides' understandings of the curriculum documents:

Researcher: *Do you actually see the curriculum?*

Jacqui & Bec: *No.*

Bec: *We have no idea.*

Jacqui: *and I just don't know.*

Researcher: *So you don't know if they [the teachers] are actually doing this because this is what the school has decided you are going to do, or if this is what the curriculum says?*

Jacqui: *No. (J, 15p8)*

Without knowledge of the curriculum framework, the aides had little knowledge of what was expected of the children. Jacqui explained that she would rather the teacher would tell her about the curriculum: *so that when we are doing the activity we understand what we are doing* (14p2). It was important that the aides understood the reasoning behind a particular activity, because *once you know why, you can expand on that* (B, 14p11). The participants believed that building and sharing knowledge about the children was a key feature of the aides' pedagogical work.

The majority of aides stated that the teachers excluded them from important curriculum knowledge. As a result, it was often very difficult for the aides to engage with and extend the children effectively:

Jacqui: *We don't understand what this whole new curriculum is because we're not taught it.*

Researcher: *and you aren't doing any professional development around it?*

Jacqui: *No, which we should, so we can understand then why they are learning numbers and letters and why they are learning sequencing ... it would be great to do a course so we had more understanding of how the curriculum works so you would feel more part of a team.* (J, 15p8)

Further, without access to curriculum documents, the aides had little opportunity to build their knowledge in order to contribute to the teaching team, which marginalised them even more. This conversation brought to light several key issues. The teacher aides were relying on each teacher's interpretations of the documents. However, without knowing what the curriculum actually stated, the aides could not tell whether the schools' pedagogical leaders influenced the curriculum content. Moreover, without professional early childhood expertise, the teachers' understanding of and advocacy for holistic, sound early childhood pedagogy was severely compromised.

Concerns for children: overcrowded curriculum, reduced play

The aides struggled with the further reduction of play-based learning opportunities and experiences for children, and the implications for their role:

Leanne: *I used to [play] all the time.*

Dianne: *It just doesn't happen.*

Leanne: *I don't do it now.*

Dianne: *There's just too much to do.*

Leanne: *Not now, I used to.* (L, 3p4)

The aides were also concerned about the reduction of time spent outdoors. Although the Preparatory children had played outdoors each day during program time as well as break times in 2007, this had changed significantly by 2011. At the last data-collection meeting in November 2011, I raised the issue of outdoor play:

Researcher: *Do they go outside to play much?*

Dianne: *At the beginning [of the year] they go out to play a lot more from what they do now.*

Bec: *Yea, they go out then.*

Sally: *No playing's going on now.*

Dianne: *They went out to play this morning, but play would have been 15 minutes outside.* (D, 23p3)

The reduction of outdoor playtime was worrying to the aides. While Sally and Dianne disliked setting up outdoors, they firmly believed that playing outdoors was important for children. Jacqui and Bec wondered whether the newly graduated teachers they worked with had a solid understanding of the significance of play—indoors or out. Bec commented:

The other thing we're not getting is that play in the morning anymore. That seems to have gone. A teacher came in here to help [the new teacher] one day, and she said 'No, that's very, very important'. She [the new teacher] was trying to get through all this stuff, but the kids were missing out on free play over there, she didn't put that into the program, and that's why the other teacher said, 'No, you need play'. (B, 14p14)

Bec felt that older, more experienced teachers understood the importance of play for young children. Jacqui agreed and thought that newly graduated teachers were too focused on delivering content rather than affording time for play and taking the children's lead. *Sometimes new teachers just say 'No, this is what I have to teach them, this is the sequence, we've got to do this before we do this because that's my outcome'* (J, 14p14). The aides felt the shift in curriculum expectations was to blame. The shift

towards the Australian curriculum resulted in teachers concentrating on English and mathematics and, as a result, play was minimised outdoors and indoors. Sally explained that she had seen a reduction in play since the beginning of the Preparatory Year:

Sally: *We were really full play based and now we've actually got to do numbers to 20 and we've got to write them and recognise them and then we have to do all our sounds and we have got to sight words ... write a sentence and two letter blends.* (S, 22p3)

Dianne: *It is just too structured...*

Sally: *Too much curriculum.* (S, 22p3)

All the aides felt there had been a significant change over the course of the study. Additionally, reduced classroom size and lack of storage space affected play. Without easy access to resources, supporting children's learning through play-based experiences was more difficult. Further, the reduction of teacher aide hours meant higher adult-child ratios, which compromised effective individualised and responsive pedagogical practices. As a result, whole-class instructive-teaching strategies were common. The aides believed that children were under too much pressure from an overcrowded curriculum and had little opportunity to play. This view mirrored that of key early childhood advocacy groups such as Early Childhood Australia and the Early Childhood Teachers' Association (Qld), as well as media reports at the time (Chilcott, 2010b, 2010c, 2011d, 2013b, 2013c; Chilcott & Chalmers, 2010; Elvish, 2013).

Supporting children

The aides felt frustrated that children were *put under stress because they have to do this that and the other ... and you don't know how that's going to rub off on them* (B, 14p10). Sometimes, when the aides did voice an opinion or concern about children, they were concerned that their teacher did not take action, or follow through. *What worries me down here is that sometimes some of the kids, it doesn't go any further* (B, 14p9). The teacher may not share the aide's concern, or recognise the aide's skill in observing a concern or need. The aides were concerned that their knowledge about children was sometimes overlooked. A conversation between Jacqui, Bec and me as researcher raised this issue. We talked about how aides and teachers shared observations of children:

Researcher: *[If you identify that] a particular child is having difficulty with something, is that received?*

Bec: *Yeah, but where it goes to I don't know.* (B, 14p8)

The aides' participation with children was also affected by the relationship with the teacher, and how they saw their role. Many felt that the teachers could not trust them with background knowledge about the children. This also closed down opportunities to interact with and support children effectively. Bec explained: *We have no idea about the backgrounds on any of these kids ... Why can't you just tell us that? Because then you use a different approach and you can use different ways of talking to them and getting them involved* (B, 14p10). Bec suggested that she was not offered information about children's backgrounds because this was considered a privacy issue. She felt that she should be trusted with information because this directly affected the child's level of participation and connection in the class.

In summary, most of the aides entered their role with perceptions of what the Preparatory Year would look like for themselves, the children and the teachers. This viewpoint was informed and contextualised by their previous life experiences. Therefore, the aides had constructed multiple theories about their role akin to the researcher's ontological stance of multiple realities informed by Burns (1994), Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 2005), Greene (1994) and van Manen (1990). However, their stories showed that the experience of taking on the role of Preparatory aide differed from their diverse perspectives. Becoming and being a Preparatory aide presented challenges to each of the six aides involved. Early days were stressful and exhausting, and left the aides feeling fraught. They met obstacles, including the ambiguity of the role, the perceived value of their role, access to professional knowledge and support, and differing interpretations of the curriculum frameworks. Occurrences of marginalisation, silence and the undervaluing of their role were common.

As they undertook their role on a daily basis, they encountered contextual and relational experiences. The aides interacted with teachers, children and parents day by day. They developed and constructed knowledge about their role relationally with these groups of people daily. Importantly, as the aides learnt more about their role, they built expectations of their role. This chapter now explores the aides' expectations of their role.

Expectations of the Role

As they undertook their daily duties within the Preparatory class, the aides developed an understanding of what to expect in the role. Likewise, the teachers with whom they worked developed expectations of the aide's role. The relationship between the teacher aide and teacher was influenced and informed by each party's expectations of the aide's role. Because this study focused on the lived experiences of teacher aides, the teacher's expectations were not sought. However, the aides' perceptions of the teachers' expectations were revealed through their stories and comments.

Throughout this study, the teacher aides identified that a major part of their role was to support the teacher: *I just see our role as you are supporting whatever the teacher is doing* (B, 15p10). Essential to the provision of support was the underlying expectation of a positive working relationship: *You've got to have a good relationship with your teacher* (L, 2p34). Getting on with the teacher was a fundamental expectation of their role.

The nature of the staff provision for the Preparatory Year meant that aides and teachers worked together. The lived experiences of teacher-aide relationships varied significantly for the aides in my study. Some felt the teacher was unapproachable and that their relationship was fragmented. Others were very connected to the teacher. I was interested to find out about the aides' expectations and experiences of the teacher-aide relationship.

Working with teachers

Amanda had not always been treated professionally by other staff, and often felt disconnected and undervalued. However, despite the marginality issues she faced when working as a general aide, the importance of a sound working relationship as she moved into a Preparatory class was critical for her. She recalled that, when she was offered her current position, she told the principal: *I'll say yes after you tell me who is teaching. If you get someone that I don't get on with I'm not doing it* (A, 1p20).

Dianne, who worked across two or three Preparatory classrooms, was also concerned about what would happen if she didn't get on with a teacher, or if no match or common

ground could be found. Her concerns about this made her wonder whether she would enjoy working in one room with one teacher. *When you are working in one classroom with one teacher for that many hours it is very important that ... you get on* (D, 1p18). She worried that it would be difficult if she didn't get on with the teacher and was concerned about maintaining a working relationship if expectations differed.

Sally's story was similar. Undertaking a role as a teacher aide in a Preparatory class was a new career move, and Sally was initially very uneasy about her role. Her professional relationship with the teacher had significantly affected her sense of value and competency. When asked to select a photo to represent her experiences in a Preparatory class in 2010, she chose the woven ball (see Figure 11). Sally explained: *Now I just think it's a complete parcel. We've just got it together so it's complete. We work really well together. We've done it for four years and we run off each other* (S, 10p3). Sally described her working relationship with the teacher as *togetherness* (S, 10p3).



Figure 11: Scott B. De Selle (2009). *Knot*.

These comments showed the value the aides placed upon a close working relationship. When considering if her expectation of a positive working relationship with the teacher had been met since moving into the Preparatory class, Amanda explained: *It has just been wonderful with [the Preparatory teacher] and I. The relationship that we've built. I see her more than I see my husband! ... she doesn't see me as her aide* (A, 1p18).

Amanda enjoyed a very strong connection with her teacher, and despite some challenges, was very pleased to have made the move. Amanda drew upon her previous experiences working with different teachers and classrooms to illustrate the difference: *It is not jumping from one class to another and having to deal with the crap from this teacher and then you jump from that crap and then jump to this crap* (A, 1p20). Spending time with one teacher in one class afforded Amanda the opportunity to build these strong connections. It was evident that Amanda felt a heightened sense of belonging and engagement because of the positive relationship. To a large extent, Amanda's successful transition to the Preparatory Year could be attributed to the success of a close working relationship, which met her basic expectation of getting on with the teacher.

As with many effective relationships, working together closely often gave the aides the ability to predict what the teacher would most likely expect. Leanne's first working relationship within a Preparatory class was extremely positive and she likened it to being able *to read minds* (L, 3p7). However, a new relationship with a different teacher was not strong, and she did not feel the same connection: *I can't read [her mind] ... I used to be able to read my teacher's mind but now I'll assume something and hope for the best* (L, 3p7). Leanne found it difficult to support the teacher without knowing or understanding what she expected. Her relationship with the teacher steadily declined.

The aides' stories revealed that, over time, some relationships opened up opportunities for shared knowledge and positive supportive practice, whereas others closed down opportunities. Leanne's positive experiences of working relationships dramatically declined over the course of this study, whereas Dianne's improved.

Dianne worked across several Preparatory classrooms each day. Rather than being assigned to one Preparatory class or teacher, Dianne worked across all the rooms. *I'm not rostered on with a particular teacher. I can go in and the teacher says, 'Well, who are you going to work with today?' 'Oh well, I'll come and work with you or I'll do whatever'* (D, 1p3). Dianne's sense of marginality and disempowerment in 2007 was palpable. Her dissatisfaction with her working arrangement was captured in her statement: *I think it would be a lot nicer to be within one group and to be involved in all that process and I think you would really feel much more included* (D, 1p9). Dianne's

expectations of the role and the reality of her daily practice with the teachers differed. She perceived that their expectations of her role did not match.

Despite a reduced sense of inclusion and belonging, Dianne continued her role within Preparatory classes for the duration of this study. At the beginning of 2011, Dianne broke her shoulder. This was at the same time as major floods in Brisbane, which placed extreme pressure on hospitals, resulting in delayed surgery. Dianne expected to return to work early in first term; however, she did not return until the second term. Returning to work, Dianne was surprised to find that her teachers had missed working with her, and she was welcomed back warmly.

We met together a few months after her return to the Preparatory class. Working through the photograph representation activity for data generation, Dianne chose the woven ball of rope to illustrate her role with the teachers in 2011 (see Figure 12). She commented: *Some of the teachers that I am working with, I'd say we make a very good combination like that* (D, 13p2).



Figure 12: Scott B. De Selle (2009). *Knot*.

This was a significant change from Dianne's early experiences in Preparatory classes when she initially struggled with her role, and felt quite detached. Dianne talked further about her sense of inclusion with the teachers during this data-generation exercise. She selected the photo of the loose and coiled ropes (see Figure 13) and explained: *It's not*

uncoiling, it's gradually becoming a fuller circle ... I think that because I've been away and now I'm back I'm probably more valued than I was, because they realise what I do, or what I was trying to do (D, 13p2–3). Dianne was visibly excited and energised when describing her feeling of being valued and appreciated when she returned to work. Dianne believed that the teachers now considered her knowledgeable. She perceived that the teachers' expectation of her role and what she was capable of had altered.



Figure 13: Dean Forbes (2008). *The yin yang of rope storage.*

Dianne's comments offered an insight into the changing nature of expectations. Both the aide's and the teacher's expectations of the aides' role could shift. Sometimes the aides perceived that the teacher's expectation of the aide altered. This resulted in the aide feeling more closely connected to the teacher, as in Dianne's story offered above, or disconnected, as illustrated in Leanne's comments about her sense of not being able to read the teacher's mind.

Dianne's experiences also demonstrated the strong connection between relationships and expectations. Matching or mismatching expectations resulted in differing working relationships. Both the aides' expectations and the aides' perceptions of the teachers' expectations of their role significantly affected the relationships, duties and support that the aides offered. These joint expectations shaped what the aides could or would do, or not do, in relation to their work in the classroom. Reciprocally, the aides' sense of belonging, connection and value were affected by their relationships. I now explore the aides' experiences of their working relationships with teachers further.

Matching expectations

Sometimes the aide's and the teacher's expectations matched seamlessly, as partly noted above, and they enjoyed a positive productive working relationship in which both parties felt valued and connected. This mirrored the findings of Di Nobile and McCormick (2008) and Giangreco, Edelman and Broer (2001) as discussed in Chapter Three. Amanda's move into a Preparatory class saw her working alongside a teacher who shared similar expectations, and Amanda felt valued. This positive connection afforded both parties status and opened up possibilities for the aide to be recognised as knowledgeable.

The aide as knowledgeable

In 2007, the first year of data generation, Leanne commented:

I've been really lucky in the entire time I've worked, both out of the Catholic system and in the Catholic system. I've worked with some wonderful teachers and I've always been treated like a professional. I've never been treated like the cleaner and the dog's body. I've always been consulted and my opinion is always asked for. (L, 2p34)

Leanne perceived that the teachers she worked with considered her knowledge and role worthy, and she was valued. She perceived that her teachers expected her to have a valuable opinion and she expected that she would be able to offer an opinion.

This regard was also reflected in the tasks Leanne was required to undertake within the classroom at that time:

I very rarely do photocopying because she sees that as a waste of my time. I very rarely do preparation work that she considers a waste of my time, because she considers my time should be with the children. The amount of time that there is, is limited, and my role is to work with the children and not to do stuff that she considers she can do. (L, 1p8)

It is evident that Leanne's role was directly affected by the teacher's knowledge and understanding of her capability. Warren, Cooper and Baturu (2004) found that teachers' differing understandings of what aides were capable of affected their allocation of tasks. Leanne's teacher viewed her as professionally capable and competent. It appeared that Leanne's teacher expected Leanne to take a pedagogical rather than a clerical role in the

classroom. Leanne's comments gave the impression that the teacher trusted her to work autonomously with children and make decisions based on her professional knowledge and understanding. This was similar to Bec's, Jacqui's and Sally's experiences.

Bec had worked with many teachers and found that they also sought and valued her knowledge: *different teachers would look at you with having so much experience and say what's your advice?* (B, 3p5). Jacqui explained that one graduate teacher *called on a lot to me for guidance, [for instance] 'how do you cope with behaviours?'* (J, 14p2). Jacqui was able to offer suggestions and strategies, and noticed that the teacher *definitely use[d] my words, like she's using words like 'let's do the patient waiting'*.

Researcher: *So you're modelling?*

Jacqui: *Absolutely. 'I really like the way you are staying there' and all that.* (J, 16p4)

These stories demonstrated that the teachers recognised the aides' experience and skills. There was an expectation that the aide had valuable advice to offer. The aides perceived that the teacher trusted their insights and understandings, and would benefit from them. Such working relationships promoted professional respect, trust and sharing, and afforded the aide to be viewed as knowledgeable.

Relationships based on mutual trust, and the expectation of the aide having knowledge to share, also opened up some space for each party to either take the lead or follow. Rather than an equal partnership, the aides' experiences revealed that, often, they would use their knowledge to make judgements about the level of support that their teacher needed at particular times. The following stories offer more insights into this.

There was a significant difference between the aides' perceptions of the levels of support different teachers expected, accepted or required as well as the support that different aides offered, or were given the opportunity to offer. When expectations matched, and the aide was viewed as knowledgeable, the relational trust between the aide and teacher gave the aide room to manoeuvre while still maintaining a positive working relationship.

In 2011, Bec, Dianne and Sally participated in a data-generation exercise involving ropes to represent aspects of their lived experiences. During this session, I offered them

a wide range of ropes (including small stuff) and encouraged the aides to manipulate the ropes to suit their choice, for instance, by cutting or tying or fraying them, and also asked them to indicate if they could not find a rope to suit. Initially, I asked them to select a rope to epitomise themselves; then, I asked them to choose a rope to symbolise the teacher with whom they worked.

Bec spent little time in selecting a rope to represent herself. She chose a long thick, knotted rope, which had a loop spliced at one end (see Figure 14). She took a longer time to find a rope to suit the teacher. She explained that the teacher was *so much better now from when she first started...and she's blossomed...she's a bit bright, she's stretchy, stretchy, scratchy* (B, 23p3).



Figure 14: Bec's rope representation of herself and class teacher

Bec's description of the teacher correlated to the features of the ropes she was looking through. The teacher with whom Bec was working at the time of this exercise was young and inexperienced, and Bec had invested considerable energy into supporting her. Bec chose a bright, elasticised rope to represent the teacher. I asked Bec to think about where she would place the stretchy rope in relation to the knotted one representing herself. Initially, Bec positioned the teacher's rope through the loop in her own rope, and the rope representing herself encircled the teacher. However, a minute

later, she adjusted the ropes so that the teacher's rope went through the loop but then sat parallel to Bec's rope (see Figure 15).



Figure 15: Bec's rope representation of teacher–aide relationship

I was interested to discover why Bec had repositioned the ropes. She explained:

Bec: We're together but, I don't know why, it just seems the right thing to do ... She doesn't rely on me as much anymore so that's good.

Researcher: So you're together, but not?

Bec: Yes, not. No, you work well together but you're still independent. (B, 234)

Bec's manipulation of the rope reflected the changed dynamics of her role with the teacher. Further, her careful positioning and repositioning of the ropes gave an insight into the differing levels of support required, and the effect of this upon her role. Bec had perceived that her teacher required greater support initially, and so she had offered her more time and help. However, she had also been responsive to the teacher's growing confidence and abilities, and adjusted her support accordingly. Bec's sensitivity to the perceived needs of her teacher enabled both her and the teacher to maintain status in this relationship. Bec and her teacher had a mutually positive relationship, and the strength of this relationship afforded the support. Although Bec invested extra time,

supporting the teacher was not considered onerous, and she was proud of the teacher's professional growth.

At the same activity, Dianne chose an elasticised green and yellow rope to represent herself. In 2011, she worked with two teachers, and so she chose two ropes (see Figure 16): *because they are very different* (D, 23p5). She described her choice of ropes to the group:

Dianne: *One's young and bright, bright and bubbly.*

Sally: *So that's the yellow?*

Dianne: *Yes, very bright, and one is older, mature.*

Sally: *So the yellow and the paler—she's lost her colour?*

Dianne: *Yes, but she's got a lot of knowledge.*

Sally: *Aha, so she's wiser?*

Dianne: *Yeah!*

Sally: *Wise old knot!*

Dianne: *Yes, and I'm on the outside because I'm the common link that ... does the work for both of them.*

Bec: *You're stretchy?*

Dianne: *Yes, working in different ways.* (D, 23p5)

Dianne identified that her relationship with each teacher was different, and that they worked in distinctive ways. Not only had her relationship with each teacher improved, she also saw herself as an important link between the teachers. This data extract demonstrated Dianne's confidence about her status in their relationship.



Figure 16: Dianne’s rope representation of the two class teachers and herself

Harmonious relationships between the teacher aide and teacher afforded the aides opportunities to share ideas. They felt comfortable raising issues, knowing that they would be listened to. When the aides considered that their teacher viewed them as knowledgeable, they believed they could use this position to advocate for children. At times, the aides would deliberately intercede and go against the teacher’s expectation of how a particular task was to be carried out if they thought it was important for the children.

Jacqui explained that she was concerned about the constant frenetic pace of the classroom. She perceived that her teacher expected that work would be done quickly. This went against what Jacqui believed was right for children, and so she intervened. Jacqui offered an example of a painting activity in which the children were involved. She explained:

I used to push them through, but now I go ‘Sorry, they were enjoying this activity, they were learning a lot from this activity, so can we please finish it tomorrow?’ And she will go ‘No, I want it done now’. That’s hard, because ... they were painting and chatting and talking about the patterns and everything and it was like ‘how come we’ve only gone through five?’ It’s because they were having a good time! (J, 15p13)

Jacqui valued the learning opportunities inherent in this painting activity. She felt that it was important for the children to have time to invest themselves in this experience. Therefore, Jacqui afforded the children time to engage with the process, capitalising on these learning opportunities. Jacqui's relationship with the teacher was such that she felt she could make a stand for children in this case. Although Jacqui was prepared to hold fast to her beliefs about children and stand up to the teacher, it cannot be presumed that others would feel comfortable to voice their opinion unless they were in a relationship with matching values of respect and sharing of information.

Partners—not aides

It was pertinent to note that, while all the participants in this study sought employment as a teacher aide, they revelled in not being viewed as an aide, but as a partner. When she took on the role of Preparatory aide, Leanne's commitment was strong, and she worked longer hours than designated to support her teacher. Leanne was proud to state that she was treated like a partner, not a teacher aide. However, when we met again in 2010, some three years later, Leanne's enthusiasm had waned. She had experienced a change of teachers the previous year. Leanne explained that she had thought this working relationship would work; however, as the year progressed, the partnership had broken down. Expectations did not match. She expressed her frustration at not feeling valued or as involved: *I used to feel like I was a partner but now I'm not a partner ... and that's sad because now I feel like a teacher aide* (L, 3p5).

The importance of being regarded as an equal partner was raised several times throughout this study. A conversation between Amanda and Sally highlighted this:

Amanda: *[The teacher] sees me as her*

Sally: *Teaching partner?*

Amanda: *and she is just amazing.* (A, 1p18)

Amanda had a strong working bond with her teacher. She perceived that the teacher expected her to be an equal partner, which raised Amanda's view of the teacher.

Sally held a similar expectation. She remarked: *We should be partners* (S, 3p5). Her teacher had made it clear that her expectation was that Sally was an equal partner in

regard to tasks: *What I do, she will do and what she does, I will do* (S, 1p36). She explained:

It's peas in a pod really because I know what she is going to be doing next and what she needs, and then she'll be the one cleaning the tables just as much as I will. She will sweep, as she says, it is relaxing for her too to do that. So if I'm going to read to the children she will clean the tables. So she has really made it easy for me to feel like I'm equal with her. (S, 1p37)

Four years later in 2011, Sally still considered her role with the teacher as a partnership. During the rope representation exercise, Sally quickly twined the thin bright rope she chose to symbolise her teacher around the thicker rope she had chosen to represent herself (see Figure 17). The teacher's rope enclosed her own, encircling and securing it. It was as if the two ropes had become one. As she worked, Sally commented brightly: *We're intertwined, yes, yes, we work as a team* (S, 23p3). Sally was very confident about her positive working relationship with the teacher, and perceived that their expectations matched.

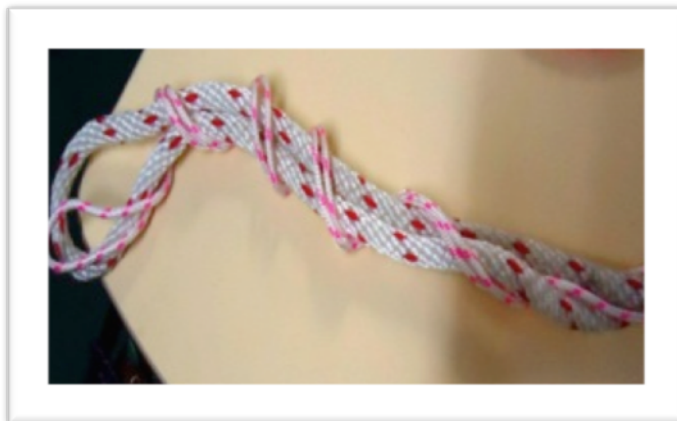


Figure 17: Sally's rope representation of teacher–aide relationship

These varied experiences give an insight into the significance of matching expectations. The aides' stories show the aides' strong sense of identity. Positive working relationships were supported by mutual understandings. Although the aides enjoyed the benefits of engagement with and belonging to a partnership, they sometimes struggled with the extra demands this expectation placed upon them. There was tension between being viewed as a partner and the commitment involved with this role. Expectations were unbalanced.

Shifting expectations

Sometimes the aides perceived that the teachers expected too much of them. Weiss (1994) investigated elementary school aides in a poor Californian school. She contended that, within the teacher–aide relationship, the power sat with the teachers and it was up to the aides to comply and shift their opinions or practices to maintain a working relationship. Conversely, if the aides did not ‘acquiesce and adjust [their] behaviour’ (Weiss, 1994, p. 340), the aides could perceive that the teachers devalued or marginalised them, or in some cases teachers would see them as a threat. The position of the aide as a threat to the teacher was outlined in Chapter Two and is discussed later in this section.

The teacher aides’ experiences in my study showed that, when expectations mismatched, if aides made adjustments to their expectations of the role to match the teacher’s, they would be more likely to be kept in favour. The shift reinforced the position of power the teacher held, and a flow-on effect was that the aide was considered valued and or knowledgeable, because she agreed with the teacher. As a result, this shift afforded a space for the aide’s voice to be heard and some negotiation to take place. The following stories offer further insight into the aides shifting their expectations to maintain status.

Co-teacher: more than a partner

At times, the aides were concerned that teachers expected them to take on too much responsibility. It was not always easy for the aides to support teachers effectively and maintain a positive working relationship without working extra hours on the now diminished allocation.

At different times throughout this study, the aides worked in classrooms with very inexperienced teachers. Often, they worked additional hours to support graduate early childhood teachers. When Jacqui worked with an inexperienced teacher in 2010, she commented: *I spent a lot more hours here, which is fine, ’cause I was happy to do that* (J, 14p2). Although Jacqui commented that she wasn’t concerned about the additional time, it cannot be assumed that all aides would offer their time so readily.

Jacqui felt torn because she realised that the teacher needed her help, yet she was also aware that the teacher was conscious of the additional time Jacqui spent with her. She explained that the teacher would say, *'No, no, Jacqui, you don't need to [help]. I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine'* (J, 14p2). However, Jacqui was reluctant to stop offering help because she could see that the teacher was not coping. She wondered: *I think she was just ... trying to swim but not make it to the surface* (J, 14p2). Jacqui was quick to defend the teacher: *[she is] very, very capable, like very good* (J, 14p2). Jacqui's defensive comment was in some ways a justification for her investment in the relationship. Jacqui felt a strong connection to the teacher and was committed to bolstering her relationship with her by offering assistance and extra time.

During the data-generation experience utilising photographs of ropes and knots in June 2011, I asked Jacqui to consider her role with the teacher. She selected the image of a rope net (see Figure 18), and commented that it reminded her of a web:

I feel like part of the web and we're getting up there. Every step is getting easier ... so that makes it good for me too. At the beginning I felt that I had a huge amount of responsibility and needed to help guide, but still give her that independence of still being a teacher and learning from mistakes ... so I felt like I was using a lot of energy, and giving a lot of myself to help guide her and take a lot of pressure off a first-time teaching role. Now this year I have stepped back from the year before. She's given me more of a sort of even playing field and makes me feel like I'm not a teacher, but I can still be part of the room, so a partner ... She'll ask me for advice and what I think about this or that, so I actually feel quite valued, and the pressure was sort of lifted off. (J, 16p1)

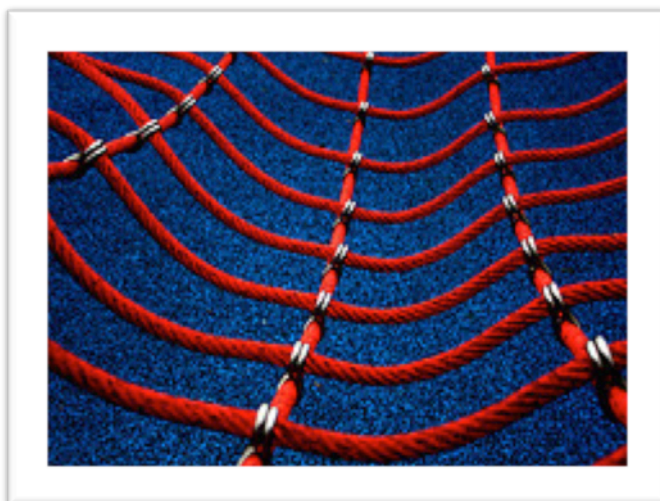


Figure 18: Joseph J (2009). Ropes.

Jacqui's story revealed some significant points about role expectations. To maintain the working relationship, Jacqui adjusted her role to match her perceptions of what the teacher expected: more time, support and to take on more responsibility. However, Jacqui was also able to readjust these new expectations as the teacher's confidence grew, which alleviated the pressure of added time and responsibility for Jacqui. This was successful for Jacqui, because she had acquiesced to the teacher's perceived needs and expectations. Their relationship had remained positive and it afforded Jacqui room to manoeuvre. Jacqui's story also reiterated the perceived significance of a partnership relationship in terms of the aides' sense of connection and value.

The teacher aides' stories often revealed a tug-of-war between supporting the teacher and taking over their role. Sometimes they suggested their role was reversed.

Acting as the teacher

Sally, who had commenced in a Preparatory class with no experience in the early childhood sector, relished being an aide who adopted the teacher role. She undertook a Certificate III qualification on entry to her position in 2007. Sally worked with a very experienced teacher who had mentored and encouraged her to undertake further study, and so Sally embarked upon a teaching degree. In 2010, Sally worked with this teacher part-time, as well as a recently graduated early childhood teacher, both of whom encouraged her to practice the skills she was learning at university. She explained: *My teacher has allowed me to bring what I have learnt into practice* (S, 22p5). Sally was proud that she could contribute her university knowledge and felt this was mutually beneficial: *because I'm doing my Bachelor of Early Childhood, [the teachers] allowed me to sort of step into that role. I feel it's going to help me* (S, 10p3).

When I visited Sally in 2010, she was in charge of a class fine motor program. She had expanded this to teach the Year 1 class as well. She told me that she also took the children for many maths and rotational activities. Sally perceived that the teachers benefited from the currency of her knowledge as well as the pedagogical support in the classroom.

However, other aides did not feel as comfortable taking on the role of teacher. Jacqui recalled working with an inexperienced teacher who sought her advice: *for everything,*

like even group time, everything. She would let me take over for everything (J, 17p4). Jacqui explained that, while she was happy to help the teacher, she did not want to assume the teaching role. She explained her role was: *definitely to help, [but] I wouldn't take over because that's not my role and that's not fair (J, 14p4).* Jacqui felt caught between her role as an aide and that of the teacher: *I just slowly stepped back, slowly, slowly stepped back, because I thought I'm not going to do her any favours if I do it all (J, 17p4).*

Bec raised a similar concern. In 2010, she was working with a teacher who had not been at the school before. She explained: *The teacher was only new to the school so she found that challenging and she felt she wasn't supported, but you can only give them so much of what you can do, you can't take over (B, 3p3).* Bec was adamant that teachers had to learn their role themselves: *You have to let them do it (B, 14p2).* Towards the end of 2010, Bec suffered stress-related health issues. A combination of personal events triggered acute anxiety, resulting in Bec taking leave for the first term of the 2011 school year. While she was away, the same teacher worked with an aide who had not worked in the Preparatory class before. Bec had found it difficult that the teacher presumed activities or tasks would be organised: *She would just think it was done [because] I would have just done it (B, 17p5),* or leave responsibility to the aide without trying to find out information for herself. She complained: *Well, see my teacher had another aide who hadn't been here before, and so ... because [the aide] didn't know, [her] ... questions were like well 'you should know that' (B, 17p5).* Jacqui worked at the same school, in the classroom next door to Bec. She affirmed to Bec how valuable it was for the teacher to have to learn for herself. She commented:

I think it was damn good that [the teacher] didn't have Bec the first term, she had to really step up, she had to really step up, and like things that she should have known about the school and what was happening around the school and stuff like that with newsletters and bits and pieces that Bec would do for her. (J, 14p3)

Whereas, previously, Bec's teacher had relied on her to take on responsibilities of the teacher's role, Bec realised she had to limit additional hours and responsibility to maintain her health and reduce her stress levels. On returning to work, she told the teacher: *I need to step back, I need to make sure I only work the hours I am supposed to work, if it's too challenging then I need to step back (B, 14p4).* Bec explained that the

teacher took this very well and began assuming more responsibility. She commented that the teacher had: *been really good, she's enjoying it actually* (B, 14p4).

Engaging in this conversation enabled Bec and her teacher to discuss their expectations of the aides' role, and work towards a common agreement. Jacqui and Bec shared the experience of adjusting their expectations of their role much further than the point at which they felt comfortable, to meet the perceived expectations of the teacher. Although they expressed the view that they were not at ease with this, it appeared that they were motivated to do it to continue a positive relationship rather than risk being marginalised or devalued. Again, these stories suggested that the aides' shift towards compliance with the teacher enabled a positive connection to be maintained, directly affecting their status in the relationship.

When expectations matched, either by mutual agreement or by acquiescence, a harmonious working relationship was maintained. In practical terms, as long as their views were the same as the teachers, the teacher–aide relationship was secure. A major benefit of sharing similar expectations with the teachers was that the aides' status in the classroom relationship was promoted. This rapport gave both the teacher and the aide status. The experiences of the aides show that their status within this relationship enabled them to raise issues that concerned them. Being knowledgeable and valuable to the teacher opened opportunities for discussion, and in some cases a renegotiation of role expectations in favour of the aide. However, there were times during this study that role expectations did not match.

Conflicting expectations

At times, the aides' perceived that the teacher's expectation of the aide's role was inferior to their own. When this occurred, the aides believed that the teachers held the status in the relationship, and the aides were disenfranchised.

Throughout this study, Sally had experienced positive working conditions with her teaching partners, and felt involved, confident and connected. However, Sally explained that: *Other teachers ... a lot of them look as you as the aide. Only the aide and that really annoys me* (S, 1p37). Leanne agreed: *If we've had a child who dirties himself a lot, I'll do it this time and the teacher will do it next time. But in other grades, heaven*

forbid if a teacher was—they would just say you go and do it (L, 1p36). Amanda also dramatically raised the issue of marginalising the aide when discussing how some other teachers in the school perceived her as a teacher aide. Amanda held up a black biro and stated: *You are the aide; I am the teacher. Sometimes my skin is this colour: the colour of the pen* (A, 1p19). The experiences shared by Amanda, Leanne and Sally mirrored the findings in the literature that aides' relationships with teachers could be unequal and unjust (Baturu, Cooper & Doyle, 2007; Ernst-Slavit & Wenger, 2006).

Bec recalled her sense of marginalisation when she did not have a successful working relationship with a teacher: *I sat at a table outside and I just did ... activities, I didn't have interaction* (B, 3p4). It could be argued that her teacher did not consider her prior knowledge and experience valuable. Such a position reduced Bec's involvement and closed down opportunities for her to participate fully within the classroom.

Leanne had changed teaching partnerships in 2008 and, although her new teacher was experienced, she had not worked in a Preparatory class before. When the aides met together in August 2009, Leanne told them: *I thought I'd be fine with this lady, I had her last year and this year but I'm just finding the way she teaches is different to what I've been used to* (L, 3p1). Leanne was very challenged because she held different expectations of pedagogical practice in the Preparatory Year: *I've been there since the day dot doing Prep and it's just not the same* (L, 3p1). Leanne stated that she had no choice but to: *get over it, suck it up and do it the way she wants it done* (L, 3p1). Not only had this change affected her role, it also significantly altered Leanne's relationship within the classroom: *whereas before I used to be treated as a partner, [now] I'm not a partner*. Leanne had always valued the contribution she could make in the classroom: *I used to have a lot of input and I used to be treated as a partner* (L, 3p4). It is evident that a change of teacher dramatically affected Leanne's perception of her role, value and connectedness with Preparatory.

In spite of sharing a pedagogical role with children, some teachers would not take into account any attempts by the aides to shift their position. At times, the aides perceived that they were working with teachers who shut down opportunities for the aides to learn about their role.

Jacqui expressed her frustration at being excluded from knowledge because she was an aide, not a teacher. She offered an insight into this exclusion:

There's a whole new ... computer program that you can tap in and everyone can see what everyone is learning ... but [I] only [found out about it] because I stuck my beak in and wanted to know more about it so I asked ... What's this new program? What's it all about? ... but no [the teacher said] 'you don't need to know about it because you are a teacher aide'. (J, 15p8)

Although the teacher may have been protecting her from being expected to do more than her role required, Jacqui felt otherwise. Jacqui believed that the teacher's response clearly showed that she perceived Jacqui's role as marginal. Jacqui's comments about the experience offered above suggested that Jacqui was not informed about new information or processes. It was up to Jacqui to find out about a process, and then ask for information about this. Her comment *I stuck my beak in* appears to signify that Jacqui felt that she was overstepping her place by asking. The teacher possessed and protected the information and, in this example, declined to share. By doing so, the teacher controlled both her status as knowledgeable and Jacqui's status as uninformed or minor.

Despite her marginal position with this particular teacher, Jacqui was tenacious, and was confident to ask questions to further her knowledge. I asked Jacqui about this:

Researcher: *So is that a confidence thing? Have you developed the confidence to ask?*

Jacqui: *Yes, definitely. I say 'ok so my understanding of this is la la la la' and she'll go 'oh no no no' and I'll say 'you know, I don't mean to pry, but how come it was done that way?' (J, 15p11)*

Jacqui's use of the phrase *I don't mean to pry* implied that knowledge rested with the teacher. Once again, this demonstrated her marginalisation from professional knowledge.

Similarly, Bec suggested that asking questions could be perceived as a challenge to some teachers. A conversation between Jacqui, Bec and me as researcher raised this:

Jacqui: *I ask questions, 'why are we doing it that way?' and I think that's ok.*

Bec: *That would be a challenge sometimes because sometimes they could think...*(B, 14p11).

Her statement indicated a hesitancy to ask in fear of offence or retribution. Bec sensed that asking questions might be perceived as threatening to the teacher.

The aide as a threat

Notably, the literature showed that some teachers view teacher aides as a threat (Gerarda & O'Reilly, 1978; Godwin, 1977; Grayson, 1961; Johnson & Faunce, 1973; Warren, Cooper & Baturu, 2004). Warren, Cooper and Baturu (2004) reported that graduate teachers in their study were reluctant to afford the aides full participation in classroom decision making, often marginalising them to primarily clerical or procedural tasks, to protect their teacher status.

Although Leanne's teacher was not a new graduate, she was establishing herself as a Preparatory teacher for the first time. This was a new teaching role for her. A conversation between Bec and Leanne highlighted the dilemma of Leanne as a potential threat:

Bec: *Does she use any of your experience?*

Leanne: *Not really. She does talk to me but I feel less involved now...*

Bec: *Is she feeling threatened there? Or else she would have a chat and sort things out.*

Leanne: *Oo, we've had a chat and what I used to do isn't the way it's going to be anymore.* (3, p5)

The marginalisation of Leanne's prior knowledge and experience led to her feeling less involved and actually affected her participation. Jacqui also encountered marginalisation with both experienced and graduate teachers.

When an experienced teacher moved into the Preparatory class for the first time in 2010, she told Jacqui, *'I'm the teacher, you'll do as you're told, so, you'll just do it 'cause that's what I'm assessing'* (J, 14p2). She was upset that the teacher did not recognise her knowledge or skills: *You know we are quite capable, very, very capable* (J, 14, p2). Jacqui felt inferior, and believed that her experience with young children

should be valued by the teacher. She commented: *You know, experience, you can't bottle that, like experience is amazing to have ... Just because we haven't got a piece of paper ... we are probably quite capable of running the room* (J, 14p12). Jacqui wanted her capabilities to be acknowledged, and believed that she could take on the role of teacher. However, to recap from earlier in this chapter, she also revealed that she did not want to assume the role of teacher. Therefore, she may have been angry if the teacher did expect her to act as teacher in the role. The multifaceted nature of her position and the relationship with the teacher were difficult for Jacqui. Her feelings resonate with the findings from Rutherford's (2012) recent study discussed in the literature review. Rutherford (2012) affirms that most aides do not want to take on the role of teacher; however, they do seek respect and recognition for their role.

Later on, when Jacqui commenced work with a graduate teacher, she sensed that the teacher initially perceived her capability as threatening. The teacher did not explain her planning or curriculum to her. Jacqui expressed her frustration at not knowing what objectives the teacher had planned for:

It's hard too, being a teacher aide and understanding what outcomes she's [the teacher] looking for. Like, why are you doing this ... What's your outcome? and that part of it I miss because I don't get a chance [to ask] and we're back to 'no, no its fine it's all good, it's all good we're doing this or you know' so, I [am] trying to say to her 'I am interested why are we doing these things'. (J, 14p2)

Jacqui's comments revealed the dilemma of trying to find out information to improve classroom practice, and the interpretation of this intention by the teacher. She referenced the limited time available for discussion between teachers and aides as contributing to the sense of threat. As discussed previously in this study, in the former preschool system, teacher aides had had full-time hours, which included some non-contact time. It was common practice for the preschool teacher and the aide to plan, discuss and reflect together. Yet, this valuable time was cut, along with a reduction of hours in the new Preparatory Year reform. Without time for curriculum and pedagogical discussions, Jacqui was concerned that her teacher interpreted her questioning as challenging her position as teacher. This resulted in the teacher trying to justify what was happening and remind Jacqui that her decisions were successful: *it's all good, we're doing this* (J, 14p2).

A common dilemma for most of the participants in this study was that teacher aides could be perceived as a threat. Although the aides did not dispute that teachers ought to be teachers and be paid for this role, the way teachers worked with the aide raised concerns. Often, the aides felt that, regardless of what they did to acquiesce to the teacher, or how they tried to raise their profile to be viewed as knowledgeable, the teacher still ostracised them. Regardless of the aides' knowledge, experience or qualifications, if the aides perceived that the teacher wanted to maintain the status in the relationship and, indeed, the classroom, they believed that the teacher would position the aide marginally. This enabled the teacher to maintain both control and status as well as limit the aides' opportunity to change the teacher's mind. In summary, it is evident that conflicting expectations between teachers and aides affected the aides' participation, role recognition and job satisfaction and, in turn, threatened their working relationship.

Throughout the years of this study, the aides shared their experiences about their relationships with parents as well. Importantly, the aides' stories revealed that their relationships with the teacher had a substantial effect on their relationships with parents. This chapter now turns to examine the aides' working relationship with parents.

Working with parents

The aides' experiences of working with parents were mixed. Many aides explained that they did not interact with parents because their working hours meant they started after the children commenced school and finished before the end of the school day. However, their comments revealed that, even without daily contact, they perceived that they shared the same view of parents as their teachers.

Parents were generally considered to be time consuming and precious about their children. Bec contended that: Some of them are very supportive and they get better as the year goes on ... the parents who have got kids at school already aren't as bad (B, 23p8). Perhaps, as the year went on, the parents became more familiar with school protocols. Perhaps the parents avoided confrontation or communication with the aides or teachers, resulting in them not being viewed as a problem.

The aides suggested that parents were often a nuisance or hindrance. It was evident that parents were viewed through a deficit lens, and were perceived to need training. This viewpoint was clearly illustrated during the rope representation data-generation activity involving Bec, Dianne and Sally. I asked the aides to choose ropes to represent the parents, and place these in relation to the ropes they had already chosen for themselves, their teacher and the children:

Dianne: *Well this changes the relationship then...*

Bec: *Well I think we've got them on track.*

Sally: *Yes, well we sort of [do]...*

Dianne: *Parents can be painful. (D, 23p8)*

Sally laughed, and explained her choice of a red rope to epitomise the parents: *Well, that's why I have got red ... Blood, sweat and tears!* (S, 23p8). Sally coiled the red rope and carefully placed it over the top of the blue and white rope she had selected to represent the children (see Figure 19). The intertwined ropes representing herself and her teacher formed a loop around the outside of the children and parents. The bold shade of red stood out against the other ropes, reflecting the amount of energy Sally perceived that parents demanded. Parents were considered to need coaching or controlling for them to be *on track* (B, 23p8) with the aides' expectations.



Figure 19: Sally's rope representation of the teacher, children, parents and herself

The aides also perceived that many parents overprotected their children, and were not resilient:

Sally: *They still hold onto their children.*

Bec: *Oh, I must just be, you know, 'get a bucket of cement'...*

Sally: *No, no, people cry.*

Dianne: *We've got one who says 'Oh look I'm really sorry for my child. I know he's giving you a hard time!' and we just have to go 'Look he's loveable!'*

Sally: *We have parents who can't release. They are still holding onto them.*
(S, 23p9)

Bec believed that some parents needed a more robust and realistic life attitude. She thought they should toughen up, or in her words, *get a bucket of cement* (B, 23p9).

During the ropes representation data collection exercise, Bec had previously chosen a net to symbolise the children in her class, and, like Sally, had placed this net in the centre of the ropes representing herself and her teacher. The teacher's rope (brightly striped) wove through the net more than hers, suggesting that Bec perceived the teacher's role to be more involved with the children. She took time to select a rope to represent parents, and settled on a thin white one. Her viewpoint of parents as precious was convincingly manifested when she fashioned this thin rope into a bow (see Figure 20). Bec took time to consider where to position this bow. She deftly placed it to the side of the other ropes, and commented: *I'll place my parents out* (B, 23p9).

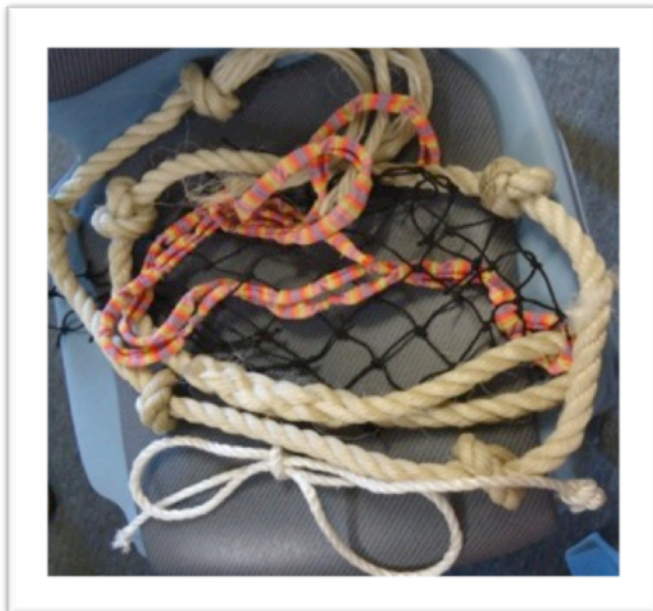


Figure 20: Bec’s rope representation of the teacher, children, parents and herself

Dianne had positioned the green elasticised rope representing herself around the two ropes she had chosen for the teachers (yellow and thin neutral-coloured ropes) and children (bundle of rope with maroon twine on top at the bottom left of photo). The rope standing for the parents (thicker neutral-coloured rope) was deliberately placed outside this arrangement, to the right of the encircled ropes (see Figure 21).

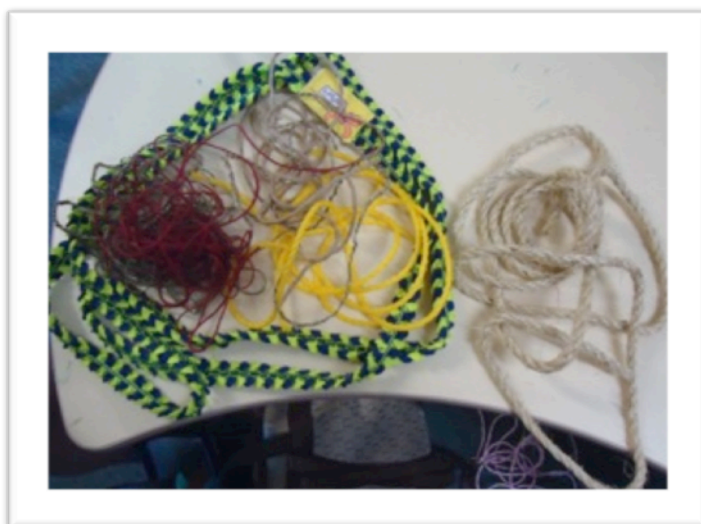


Figure 21: Dianne’s rope representation of the teachers, children, parents and herself

Dianne explained:

Dianne: *There's still that distance.*

Bec: *Yes, keeping their distance.*

Dianne: *Yes on the outside. They are not in the inner sanctum!*

Bec: *No! Not in.*

Sally: *Ooh, ours are ours are right in!*

Bec: *Gosh!*

Sally: *Yes that's what I mean.*

Bec: *No, ours are told to 'rack off'. Often they do ring.*

Dianne asked Sally: *Do they come and help?*

Sally: *Some come to watch...*

Dianne: *Our teachers don't want any parent helpers ... no parent helpers in our room.*

Bec: *[One dad] he tries [to talk to us]. He stands at the door and says Mrs xxx [Bec's name]. I mean, I think, will I be nice? Will I be nice? No! We're busy.*

Dianne: *Well I get them coming to the door and saying 'My child just fell over before school. Can you do some first aid?' and you have to get ready for the rest of the day and you can't. (D, 23p10)*

This conversation reiterated the aides' viewpoint that parents were time consuming and needy. Their comments also suggested that the aides felt that conversing with parents or helping parents meet the perceived needs of their child was not part of their role. Already pressed for time because of the reduced teacher aide hours, the aides considered that parents added extra pressure to these time constraints.

These experiences also highlighted the degree to which the teachers' and aides' expectations corresponded. Bec and Dianne perceived that they shared similar expectations to those of their teachers, and strongly positioned their view of parents as negative and demanding. Sally's comments exposed an uncertainty. She believed that the parents were unwilling to let go of their children and showed little resilience.

However, parents were involved in her classroom. When she explained about the level of parent involvement in the class, the other aides were taken aback. Sally's response: *Yes, that's what I mean* (S, 23p10) gave the impression that Sally agreed with the other aides that parents were needy and of little benefit in the classroom. It seemed that Sally's expectation of parents differed from that of her teacher. It appeared that Sally had to shift her position in line with the teacher's to accept parental involvement. Whether the teacher was in fact aligning her own expectations with other teachers or administration expectations of parents' involvement was unclear. The school prided itself on a strong sense of community with family involvement. Although Sally had shifted her view to meet her teacher's, they may have both shared the same perception of parents as overprotective.

It is evident that the aides' experiences with parents were challenging. Their conversations revealed how their teachers and they did not always value parental involvement, and parents were considered a nuisance or bother. However, the aides' negative perceptions of the value of parents were incongruous to their belief that parenting skills were crucial to success in their role.

Most of the aides identified that they drew on their personal maternal experiences to navigate and define their role. As discussed earlier in this study, the aides' view of their role as maternal raised the dilemma of traditional maternal discourses contributing to the low status and value of early childhood educators. Although most of the aides and teachers saw parents as needy, and in need of training or controlling, parenting skills were paramount to their job.

The following data excerpt illustrates the dilemma of being a parent and being viewed as a parent by the teacher. Jacqui was a parent and had numerous years of casual work experience in a variety of early childhood settings. Jacqui was very confused by the expectations of her role when she started working as an aide in the Preparatory class. While undertaking the photograph representation activity, she discussed the contradictions she felt between her role as parent and aide:

I am a parent too ... so I wear a lot of hats and different roles and responsibilities, so last year I felt like I was in a triangle because I was [the] parent liaison [person], I was a parent and I was a staff member so I felt very torn. (J, 16p2)

As Jacqui looked through the selection of photographs, she picked up the knotted ropes (Figure 22) and the tug-of-war (Figure 23) photographs.

She commented: *I was this or that* (J,16p2).



Figure 22: Alex Skelly (2006). *Knotted rope*.



Figure 23: Jonathan Gayman (2007). *Hands playing tug o' war*.

Jacqui selected the tightrope photograph (see Figure 24) next, shaking her head as she reflected:

[It was] shocking, I was torn from parent to staff member, so very, very much so and I felt like I was treading on a fine line and I didn't know which way I was going to fall.

This year [2011] I have taken away the parent liaison situation but I am still a parent. But this year I feel so much more part of the team. I don't look parent; the staff don't see me so much as a parent anymore; I don't feel like I'm just torn. (J,16p2)

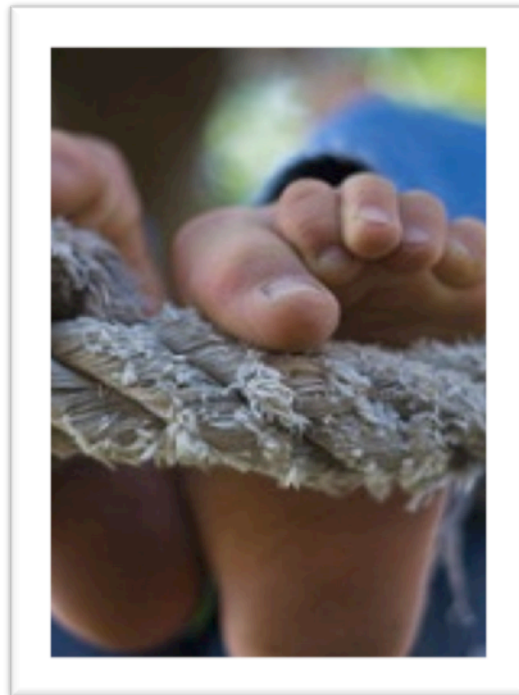


Figure 24: Torm (2008). *Bokeh on a rope*.

Jacqui chose the photograph depicting a collection of ropes knotted over a pole (see Figure 25) and explained how this image correlated with her current feelings: *This year I feel more like more of a team working together, being on the same pole with different shaped ropes on the pole with different personalities. Sometimes I feel like I'm a parent plus I'm here so ... [it's] different (J, 16p2).*



Figure 25: Martin (2006). *Ropes on a boat—Jersey.*

It was evident that Jacqui was caught between being a parent and maintaining a working relationship with teachers who did not value parents. As a result, Jacqui relinquished her parent liaison role. Her comment that she no longer *look[ed] parent* (J, 16p2) provided a clear insight into how important it was for Jacqui to be viewed as an aide to the teacher. Jacqui had shifted her expectations to comply with those of her teacher. She believed that minimising her parenting role had raised her profile as an aide, increasing her value to the teacher.

As discussed earlier in this section, some of the aides did not view parents positively or wish to spend time with them, and they perceived that their teachers held similar views. However, some were constricted and constrained by others' perceptions of their role.

Contradictory views about parents

Many participants perceived that teachers thought they were incapable of speaking to parents professionally. While the aides understood that parents were to be referred to the teachers regarding any specific inquiries about their child, sometimes they perceived that the teachers did not trust the aide. An excerpt from the photograph data-generation activity illustrates this dilemma.

When asked to describe her experience of working with parents, Jacqui chose the photograph depicting a rope maker (see Figure 26). She commented that her interactions with parents were controlled and limited by other's expectations of her role:

Sometimes you feel like even though you are more capable of doing a lot more responsibilities and stuff, you're sort of tied up. Like even though you're quite capable speaking to parents, which I had done for like 10 years before this, speaking to parents, you know helping them speak to kids and things like that, you're tied because it's not in your description and that part frustrates me because I'm actually quite capable of speaking to parents about the children's development and all that but I can't, so that's tricky. (J, 16p3)



Figure 26: Irma (2008). Rope maker at work.

Jacqui had considerable experience in a variety of early childhood settings yet she did not feel she could contribute to this, or be recognised for it. Jacqui perceived that minimising interactions with parents was another example of reducing her status as knowledgeable, in order for teachers to maintain the control of knowledge and status as informed.

Most of the aides identified that balancing their role with parents with the perception of their teacher's view of parents was complex. Many perceived that their teachers did not encourage or see value in parent interaction within the classroom. The majority of the

aides shared a common view that their teachers would rather work with the class of children with their aide, not parents.

In spite of her teacher excluding parents from interacting in classroom activities, Dianne revealed a puzzling dilemma of being placed in direct competition with parents. In 2007, Dianne's Preparatory classes went on an excursion to a zoo that was an hour away from her school. The teachers and some parents attended, yet Dianne was excluded from joining in. The other aides were horrified to hear this, and sought clarification:

Amanda: *Could you not have asked to go?*

Dianne: *I was told I wasn't. There are only so many seats and so much money and I'm not needed.*

Leanne: *My teacher wouldn't dream of taking a parent over me.*

Sally: *That's right.*

Amanda: *We don't want to take the parents.*

Leanne: *You want professional backup.*

Sally: *That's right.*

Leanne: *Because half the parents aren't really worth taking. All they do is stand around and gossip anyway half the time. (L, 2p50)*

The other aides clearly believed that Dianne should have attended the excursion. They felt that the parents could not contribute the same level of assistance, and would be a hindrance in many cases. Moreover, legal and governance implications arise; however, Dianne did not reveal how many teachers supervised this excursion. The other aides were convinced that this same exclusion would not occur with their teachers. Dianne perceived that her teachers saw the excursion as a numbers issue and that they did not consider the value of Dianne's experience or knowledge of the children. Surprisingly, the teachers with whom Dianne worked chose to include the parents, even though she revealed that parents were not usually valued, included or wanted in classroom activities, as illustrated earlier in this chapter. In this particular instance, Dianne's attendance and role in the excursion was in direct competition with the parents. In real

terms, it is evident that the teachers' decision making and the parents were a threat to Dianne's participation, involvement and sense of belonging.

The lived experiences of the aides indicated that working relationships with parents were complicated. Some aides felt that parents threatened their position in the classroom and, in turn, their relationship with teachers. The aides' stories also showed their views of parents were sometimes quite paradoxical, which contributed further to the complexity of how the aides perceived their role.

Synthesis

This chapter has revealed the multiplicitous nature of the teacher aide's role in Preparatory classes. This new role has presented both challenges and opportunities. Many aides moved into Preparatory classes mindful of the previous preschool teacher aides' role. However, unlike the previous preschool system, the new role they embarked on had fewer hours and less support. The participants' stories reveal their anxiety about trying to learn about this new role and the ambiguities they faced.

Cutcher (2009) reminds us that our sense of identity and previous lived experiences affect our receptivity to change. Many of the aides drew upon their skills as mothers and viewed their role as maternal. However, Leanne, who had the most early childhood experience in this study, was adamant that her qualifications and field experience underpinned her decision making. This chapter has offered insights into the varied views of the aides' role, and their effect upon their daily practice.

Central to the lived experiences of the Preparatory aides was their relationship with teachers. Attachment to a class and teacher was highly prized by the teacher aides in this study. This chapter reveals that, when expectations matched within relationships, the aides felt acknowledged and valued, supporting the findings of the literature review (Di Nobile & McCormick, 2008; Giangreco, Edelman & Broer, 2001). Although some aides experienced this sense of respect at some times during this study, many did not. Some intentionally manoeuvred their position within the relationship to gain the teachers favour. Others were marginalised because they perceived themselves as threatening to teachers. Interestingly, this finding correlated with much earlier studies

(Gerarda & O'Reilly, 1978; Godwin, 1977; Grayson, 1961; Johnson & Faunce, 1973; Warren, Cooper & Baturu, 2004).

The aides' perception of, and their relationships with, parents are also complex and, at times, contradictory. Of particular interest was the dichotomy between the aides' perception of parents as time consuming and in need of training, and their own reliance on their maternal skill set.

During this study, I met with the aides over a period of five years. Throughout this time, the aides questioned and expressed confusion about the purpose of the Preparatory Year, their role, and their concerns about the expectations placed upon Preparatory-aged children, teachers and themselves. Their stories indicated that the aides believed that principals, colleagues, administration teams and policymakers lacked a clear understanding about their role. The next chapter, 'Political Stuff', considers the lived experiences of the aides more closely in relation to policy.