

Article

Educator Perceptions of Early Learning Environments as Places for Privileging Social Justice in Rural and Remote Communities

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Abstract: Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia has long been associated with the concept of social justice, however, a clear understanding of what it looks like across diverse services and communities is not available. This article reports the process of inquiry, as well as the outcomes, of a small-scale study designed to uncover the perceptions of ECEC educators working in rural and remote communities in the state of Queensland. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with five educators from rural and remote settings identified as areas experiencing significant growth in population diversity. An initial thematic analysis of the data revealed three key themes. A secondary analysis using a place and space conceptual framework uncovered deeper, more sophisticated meanings of the educator experience of social justice. The research is important in bringing pedagogical conversations to the forefront regarding ECEC educator perceptions of their role in creating a socially just learning environment. In addition to identifying future research possibilities, implications from the findings indicate opportunities for re-examining and rethinking initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning.

Keywords: social justice; early childhood; rural and remote; space and place



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1. Introduction

The transformative influence of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and pedagogical quality [1] is well-established in the early childhood sector and beyond [2]. Clear links between ECEC and its long-term outcomes emphasize the importance of nurturing children's development of positive identity and a sense of belonging [3–5]. Young children develop dispositions in the first five years of life which help determine their connection to people and place. The dispositions developed in the early years also contribute to children's views of self and of others, including attitudes and actions related to equity, inclusion, diversity and social justice [6]. According to Hard, Press and Gibson [7], "there are significant possibilities for ECEC educators to engage with principles of social justice and take up the demanding and complex task of transformation—of creating new possibilities and opportunities for children and families". By cultivating learning environments that promote social justice, ECEC educators are in a privileged position of empowering children to be informed; to promote connection and to advocate for dignity, equity, involvement and participation [8–10]. Pelo [11] writes, "When we embrace social justice and ecological teaching, we participate in changing history, starting with the future of children."

Furthermore, for the special issue of social and emotional development in early childhood education, this article is premised on the belief that social justice plays a critical role in every social and emotional experience, and that "... high-quality SEL [social-emotional learning] programs facilitate and rely upon many of the same practices that contribute to more equitable and inclusive learning environments" [12]. Social justice redefines early childhood education, which continues to have a growing emphasis internationally on school readiness to social and emotional learning and development [11].

Gaining a sophisticated understanding of early childhood teacher's perceptions of social justice and their role in providing education for a socially just world is an inquiry topic that we identified as important and necessary as teacher educators and researchers in the early childhood sector. As researchers in a regional university, we are particularly attuned to the changes occurring in contemporary Australian communities outside of major cities, which demand consideration of the critical influence of social justice within early childhood education. For example, the rural and remote townships in southwest Queensland where this small-scale study was conducted have experienced changing demographics as a result of growth in nontraditional industries such as gas and mining developments [13]. The changing social makeup of rural and remote communities inflicts a strain on existing resources, services, facilities and housing affordability [14]. According to Morrison [15], institutions and services such as ECEC programs contribute significantly to building the resilience and resourcefulness needed to address contemporary challenges in rural and remote communities.

2. Literature Review: Research on Social Justice in Rural and Remote Communities

While there has been a call for the ECEC sector to respond to the changing nature of rural and remote communities, a literature review revealed that empirical research in Australia has focused on theorizing leadership in relation to social justice in ECEC and explored concerns about preservice teachers' perceived capabilities, as well as their knowledge of teaching social justice. Across two decades, research has also continued to debate various theoretical and conceptual understandings of social justice. The research team was unable to locate current research which inquired about social justice with ECEC educators currently teaching in rural and/or remote communities.

2.1. Defining Social Justice

ECEC in Australia has long been associated with the concept of social justice, with historic foundations of ECEC existing within moral and philanthropic dimensions [7]. Pelo [11] also demonstrates a history of social justice in early childhood: "When we embrace a vision of social justice and ecological teaching in early childhood education, we join a lineage of educators who are intent on changing history, participating in the "ongoing story of men and women, ideals intact", who understand that how we engage with the youngest children in our communities speaks volumes about the kind of society in which we hope to live". Francis and Mills [16] assert an imperative to "build on our existing empirical and philosophical research to develop new ideas and constructive principles and practices for the provision of socially just education . . . to ensure that our responses are not simply reactionary, but rather are constructive and future-focused".

While notions of social justice remain central to early childhood educators' practice, the literature review revealed that a clear understanding of what this looks like is not available [17–20]. According to Caplan et al. [8], definitions, types and conceptualizations of social justice have long been disputed. With multiple meanings attached to the contested term, varied understandings of what social justice is as a concept—and as a practice—exist [10,18,20–23].

Through the lens of complexity theory, Mevawalla [23] considers social justice as a concept, emphasizing the ways in which social justice is entrenched in the values and processes within early childhood systems. Mevawalla [23] suggests a relational and ethical education approach necessary to "capture the complexity of social justice as it unfolds, without reducing the diversity of this broad concept or oversimplifying the interconnectedness of its relationships to broader political, sociocultural and ethical branches".

Largely, the relevant research literature pertaining to social justice and early childhood illuminates a range of tensions and dichotomies contributing to the complexities of social justice [22]. There has been no research located about how social justice teaching and learning intersects with practicalities of teachers living in rural and remote communities.

What are the issues, implications and considerations for social justice in ECEC settings in rural and remote areas?

2.2. Social Justice and Early Childhood Leadership

Hard, Press and Gibson [7] state that educators have a responsibility to encourage equity and to challenge the inequity that exists, with a potential to generate “socially just” educational communities. They argue for informed organizational leadership to attain socially just early childhood education. “Intentional, critical and strategic leadership calls for educators to uncover and question assumed knowledge, and to provide opportunities to engage with new understandings. The challenge for intentional leaders is to forge collective approaches which disrupt oppressive practices and affirm and celebrate diversity”.

Nicholson et al. [24] also identified the important link between social justice and early childhood leadership. Through an analysis of international literature, Nicholson and her colleagues determined how conceptualizations of early childhood education leadership include attention to social justice and equity. Importance lies in early childhood educators developing “knowledge about how oppression and marginalization operate in society and the role of leadership work to reimagine and transform oppressive and marginalizing experiences for children, families and the early childhood profession” [24].

While research of Nicholson et al. [24] revealed a growing body of literature discussing issues of social justice, significantly relevant to their analytic focus, they discovered that a high percentage of literature omits explicit discussion of social justice in theorizing about leadership. As Starrett et al. [25] identifies, in rural and remote communities, teachers can facilitate and experience nurturing and supportive relationships with families. Socially and culturally responsive pedagogy results from teachers who live, work and are more socially connected to the rural and remote community and have greater connections and resources [25]. Caplan [8] describes “leading social justice” as “individual and collective wellbeing, whereby the rights of all living beings and the ecosystem are fulfilled equitably”. What does the leadership role of educators look like in rural and remote communities when there is a limited availability of services and resources? How do educators perceive their role in early childhood settings which are often the foundation and identity and social activity [25] in rural and remote communities?

2.3. Preservice Perceptions and Initial Teacher Education

A study by Boyd, Wadham and Jewell [26] analyzed prospective educators’ views of how they perceive teaching and education and its place within the Australian context. Analysis of student journals and survey responses illuminated the way in which “tensions between various dialectical concepts central to teaching, social justice and Western culture have a limiting effect upon the preservice teacher’s capacity to manage diversity and contradiction” [26]. The researchers identified the need to challenge existing notions of individual and society, and of ways of thinking about teaching and social justice.

Through an examination of Australian early years policy and practice, Herbert [27] argues the significance of social justice and equity specific to children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and the important role of the early childhood educator: “In order to understand why social justice and equity are central to delivering quality early years education to Indigenous children, it is vital that the modern educator has some knowledge of educational history, in particular the role of education in promoting and maintaining the status quo, thus ensuring the continuing dominance of those who occupied positions of power” [27]. Herbert [28] emphasizes the importance of educators in being knowledgeable about Australia’s colonial history to appreciate the historical role, as well as the contemporary role of education in attributing to power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

A study by Blanchard et al. [28] examined preservice educators’ reactions and responses to topics surrounding social justice, demonstrating how students’ self-reflection and growth informed their processing of areas of tension and challenge. The authors attest

that “it is vital to understand how students perceive and use the content from courses such as these during their initial post degree years as teachers” [28]. Blanchard and her colleagues recommend further research to determine if knowledge attained within their initial teacher education degrees transmits into teaching practice.

In the Australasian context, Solehuddin and Adriany [29] interviewed 13 Indonesian kindergarten educators’ perceptions on the issue of social justice. The findings revealed the complexities confronting educators in understanding what social justice means and negotiating social justice in their teaching; that is, to what extent social justice can be taught to young children. The researchers also noted the “messiness” of educator understandings of social justice, with a need for preservice teacher programs to address this shortfall.

Research spanning two decades has indicated that there remains a dearth in empirical research on what ECEC educators understand about social justice education [30]. In addition, a systematic content analysis documenting the prevalence of social justice in teacher education in Australia has not been published [31].

In summary, the literature review demonstrates that current research about ECEC and social justice in Australia is scant. Complexities and uncertainties around social justice generate further research opportunities to inform conversations, knowledge and practices in initial teacher education and in the ECEC field. Furthermore, the findings of the review prompted the research team to wonder about the possibilities for further inquiry into understanding educators’ perceptions of social justice and how they transfer these notions into practice in changing rural and remote communities. The following research question guided the small-scale study: How do early childhood educators perceive ECEC services as places for privileging social justice in rural and remote communities?

3. Research Design

The study employed an interpretive qualitative methodological approach which guided data collection, analysis and interpretation of early childhood educators’ perspectives and reflections. Data collected through individual in-depth semi-structured interviews uncovered the perceptions of five early childhood educators working in rural settings in southwest Queensland. The five contexts in which the educators lived and worked were identified through the literature as experiencing significant growth in population diversity.

3.1. Participants of the Small-Scale Study Ethics and Participation

After an ethics approval from the University of Southern Queensland was acquired to proceed with the research (Application ID H19REA155), the process of recruitment commenced. The participant selection procedure involved purposive sampling as was necessary to enlist the two-fold components of rural locality in the southwest Queensland corridor; as well as being individuals employed as early childhood educators within this locale. Early childhood services were approached via phone or email and invited to indicate interest in participating in the project via online interviews. After committing to the project, participants were emailed with more details and asked to give informed consent. As Denzin and Lincoln [32] state, informed consent is the cornerstone of ethical research. Prior to giving consent (both written and stated in the opening of each recorded interview) participants were “fully informed” of the interview expectations, advising what would be asked of them, and how the data would be recorded, stored and later disseminated. Participants were provided with written information advising them of the research process, potential risks and benefits, and a clear explanation of the option to withdraw from the research at any time.

The five early childhood educators were valued for their explanatory power [33]; that is, for what the research team thought they could illustrate separately and together. Together they offered diversity in terms of gender, short- and long-term experiences of living and working in rural and remote communities, and with a variety of qualification backgrounds. All participants lived and worked in southwest Queensland, a region of Australia classified as rural and remote [34]. The communities were also identified through

the literature as experiencing significant growth in population diversity [35]. The educators operated typically in their privileged leadership roles in early ECEC services.

3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Data collected through individual semi-structured interviews uncovered the perceptions of the five early childhood educators working in rural settings. Due to geographic location, interviews were carried out online via the Zoom platform and recorded, each lasting 45–60 min.

Two main questions guided the interview schedule, with the intention of uncovering the educator's experience and perspectives of social justice:

1. What does social justice “look like” in the early childhood service? and
2. What are the affordances and challenges educators face in engendering social justice in the early childhood services?

Each interview began by taking a broad perspective, to ensure the engagement of participants, before narrowing in on questions related to (and more targeted towards) the research question.

As Scott and Usher [33] maintained, interviews serve a range of purposes. The program team's intention for the interviews with the teacher participants included a way to access experiences and teaching practices. The interviews with the early childhood teachers enabled the project team to inquire into how they perceive the use and implementation of social justice in their early learning environments. The informative sample afforded an in-depth inquiry into what it means for the ECEC educators to be in that setting, what is going on for them, what the world looks like in that particular rural setting, and what their experiences mean—all in relation to the small-scale study's questions about social justice.

3.3. Analysing the Data

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Once the interview transcripts were de-identified, the research team completed two phases of analysis and interpretation. The data produced through the interviews were the first phase of interpretive material from which further interpretation and analysis could proceed. A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was employed to recognize, analyze and report patterns and themes within the data. A six-step thematic analysis procedure [36] guided the researcher's recursive process in working holistically rather than deductively and being willing to consider the educators' perceptions in their full complexity. The interview transcripts were analyzed independently by the researchers to identify themes, which were then discussed and refined in collaboration. This independent process was important to substantiate trustworthiness of themes.

Green and Nolan [37] advocated the move away from a deficit model and negative perceptions of rural and remote Australia, to approaches focused on perceptions of places and how space is utilized by certain groups. Contemporary views of rural teaching “offer us the opportunity to consider space and place as culturally complex and multiply constructed within which behaviors are enacted by social groups”. Roberts [38] advocates “The need for a greater focus on place, in general, and specifically in models of pedagogy . . . ” [38]. The second phase of analysis and interpretation, therefore, adopted the conceptual framework of “place and space” [39–41] to further uncover the ways in which social justice was perceived and experienced in early childhood services in rural and remote settings.

The framework guided the research team to view ECEC services as “early learning places”, to refer to the places that evolve from the way early childhood services are inhabited by the educators, children and their families and how everyday life evolves in the service. Specifically, the place and space framework provided a structure for attending to the significance of the resources used by the educators, the rules and routines introduced, the relationships developed specific to this place and the meaning that forms from educator narratives about what has happened in the ECEC services. To appreciate the experiences and perceptions of the educator at a deeper level, the conceptual framework of place and space was overlaid to each of the three emerging themes from the first phase of analysis.

4. Results

4.1. First Phase: Thematic Findings

The emergent themes from the first analysis underscore the way ECEC services were part of the larger context of the surrounding communities. The everyday lives of the children and educators in each rural and remote community circumscribed the ways social justice was attended to in the early learning place, as found in the following three themes that emerged from the educators' perceptions of social justice:

1. Complex and difficult to define,
2. Creating a learning place and
3. Contextually relevant.

4.1.1. Social Justice Is Complex and Difficult to Define

A review of the literature reveals that there are multiple meanings of the term "social justice" in capturing the complexities of injustices that exist [20]. The five educators in this small-scale study also acknowledged their uncertainty of the term "social justice" and shared their reservations in defining the term. Despite their reservations in identifying the meaning, the educators articulated key aspects and broad ideas, through discussion of their everyday practices, which have been associated with conceptual understandings of social justice in previous research: a focus on rights (e.g., [42]), a focus on fairness and equity (e.g., [43]) and a focus on participation (e.g., [44]). Specifically, participants articulated notions of fairness:

"they are all very child-centered. They're all in the best interests of the child which you know—again—is about fairness for all across the board—it doesn't matter who the child is or where they come from . . . "

"I don't know if it's a social justice—but it's the justice for everyone, and then when we talk about it to the children . . . we have a lot of discussions about whether things are fair or not. . . "

"to me personally it means making sure that everyone gets a fair go. . . "

Analysis of the interview data brought to light philanthropic aspects regarding equal access for all members of the educators' rural and remote communities:

"equal access to things, just helping—kind of helping out—making sure everyone's kind of, you know, just lifting everyone up I suppose . . . "

"We're pretty lucky because our center was taken over by a not-for-profit church organization originally, and their philosophy is for helping these small rural areas to have access to quality early childhood education. . . "

"I guess what it means to me is—is to ensure that every child ends up at school with equal access so when they leave early childhood to get to school that every child should be on a level playing field and that means supporting the child, supporting the family and supporting the community around them and the wider community as well. . . "

"it's just having that real authentic meaning of why we are doing what we are doing which is basically forming that sense of identity for that child and family. A sense of belonging. That's a learning opportunity for our other children. That is social justice coming together and being equality . . . "

"I feel like it's easier for us in early childhood centers as opposed to a school because we have that flexibility—we can have those personal relationships with families—we're a little but more flexible, whereas schools really kind of can't be as flexible . . . Trying to make everyone feel like they belong here, like they have a spot here and that we are here without judgement."

In discussing their work with children and families in their communities, the educators also acknowledged a broad range of matters as issues of social justice: children with additional needs; families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds; families who have low socioeconomic status; families affected by drought; fly-in fly-out (FIFO) workers and their families, and gender identity. The complexities of the rural and remote communities in which they lived and worked—social isolation, drought and socioeconomic

status—brought to light mental health as a current community issue. The educators shared their role in caring for the mental health of parents through expressing directly to them concern about their wellbeing and ensuring that the parents utilize the ECEC service to allow time for themselves. The quality of the educators' interactions with families were specific to the rural and remote communities and the relationships nurtured with children and their families. The relationships that evolved gave the teachers a sense of belonging, of being integrated into the community, and of having status and a positive identity, which made the social justice activities and responses possible. For the educators in this small-scale study, teaching for social justice draws upon expertise in local and cultural knowledges and family and community circumstances and weaves together local phenomena (bringing the community into the everyday life of the ECEC service) and children's learning experiences.

4.1.2. Social Justice Is Creating a Learning Place

The educators exemplified their understandings of social justice as they shared narratives of their lived experience in the ECEC service. The inclusion of resources, such as books depicting diversity, was a common everyday practice described. The educators also discussed initiatives and programs they accessed in their professional learning to guide social justice practices, for example, the Be You Initiative and the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child. The Australian Early Years Learning Framework, the guiding curriculum document for ECEC educators working in approved early learning places, was not discussed by the educators in the interview.

Predominantly, social justice was perceived by the ECEC educators as being discovered through interactions and relationships in response to fortuitous moments throughout the everyday life of the early learning place, rather than being about curriculum content or a concept taught intentionally.

"I don't know that we actually intentionally teach it so to speak. . . "

"probably not so much intentionally but just in our everyday interactions . . . "

"I feel like it's something that you do not really something that you know but something that you do . . . "

"I suppose it's just sort of through the course of the day as it comes up. I mean we don't really—unless there's an event coming up—we don't go out of our way to plan it so to speak. . . "

"we ensure that our interactions and the language that we're using are really encouraging that social justice. Everyone's family is different, your experiences are different and that's acceptable and ok. Being kind to other people because you never know what their experiences are at home, or you know the difficulties that they are having . . . not so much intentionally but just in our everyday interactions . . . "

Being flexible and encouraging a sense of safety, security and belongingness were all communication and relational practices deemed as important for nurturing and sustaining genuine relationships with families and children. Educators discussed the importance of respecting children as individuals and appreciating each family as having unique needs.

"I feel that as much as we don't have at our fingertips available what metropolitan areas would, what a country rural town does have that is different is connections. And I feel that like on the wellbeing side even though I'm very passionate, we need to get wellbeing right. Unfortunately, like anybody we see in the media it's not really going that well, and that's including our poor town. But what I feel is missed in metro areas is that wellbeing aspect with relationships."

Planning for connectedness in their practices facilitated the educators in knowing each family, rather than knowing about the family, as well as being attuned to community events and circumstances.

"We probably try our hardest to make sure we are—with our inclusion support—that we are not just including—because we don't have a lot of cultural inclusion—but making sure we are catering to all family kinds of lifestyles, home environments and kind of things like that. . . "

“It’s not just their culture, but their family context as well. How we make sure we’re kind of being open to all and just having full access”

In this way, the educators identified understandings of social justice as part of their personal and/or professional philosophy of care and practice, and as being something “lived” rather than “taught”.

4.1.3. Social Justice Is Contextually Relevant

Contextual relevance was revealed as being of significance to educator perceptions of ECEC services as places. In one particular example, the educator spoke of the idea of sharing in play scenarios and how the way sharing was taught/enacted, was very much dependent on the community in which the children lived. This rural and remote context has seen significant upheaval with 44 local families being bought out for mining, where families felt they really had no choice about giving up their farms. As the educator explained, it was for this reason that children discussed with educators the concept of sharing in terms of fairness and rights—and with reason—questioning if fair for you means fair for me. Should I stop riding the bike because you want a turn now? Across contexts, the ECEC educators identified numerous opportunities for discussions with children about events in their own lives in which respect, trust and belonging was enacted.

“I think you need to be contextual—you need to make it important to YOUR community, not just an overall view but, you know, you need to be specific to your community’s needs . . . ”

“you really have to be on top of your community issues and make sure that your center is really catering for those needs . . . I think it very much affects what your social justice—what you’re looking at. For us it’s not necessarily multicultural where you might get in the city but more economic concerns and issues . . . ”

“we talk about going to war because that’s important to our community and we go and march with the school and they have the ANZAC parade. They actually have a book laying and a wreath laying ceremony where the community members for all the different committees—they actually donate books to the kindergarten and to the school at the ANZAC Day so then we then use that opportunity to talk about where they’ve come from and why they’ve given them to us and what ANZAC’s about kind of thing too and you know why we have to go to war too and that’s—I guess that’s like a hot topic all in itself too I suppose . . . ”

“we try and network with a lot of our community services, our police, our medical, to try to make sure we are helping those—and because we’re a smaller town those, it probably is easier—so we can have the local police come in you know once a month just to get to know the kids, the families. . . ”

“ . . . making the effort to build those relationships and get to know them as well as the community—get out into the community, see what’s going on, you know, what services are out there maybe what’s not out there? What’s lacking. . . ?”

The ECEC services where the educators worked were the very source of issues, incidences and events that constrained or enabled how they could shape learning about and through social justice. The educators’ own abilities, interests and propensities also interfaced with the ECEC services as learning places that evolved.

4.2. Second Phase of Analysis: Uncovering Deeper Meanings

The stories and experiences shared in the interviews support an orientation of social justice as “curriculum as lived” [45] as opposed to curriculum as planned and or as implemented without attention to context. Using “place” instead of “context” serves as a reminder of the human agency in place-making and prompts critical interpretation of the social structures and relationships that shape social justice learning in ECEC services [40].

Social justice as “something that you do” suggests that the ECEC educators were alluring to social justice as “the whole experience of being there” [41]. The social justice curriculum implemented and perceived by the educators resulted from the wider rural

community and everyday life in the ECEC service, and meanings of those experiences held by the inhabitants (children, families and educators).

The educators understood the importance of developing relationships that were specific to their learning place and the rural community. These relationships served to shape the “social justiceness” of the ECEC services through the discursive and lived practices they attended to, created and enacted. Similarly, the educators’ inclusion of resources depicting diversity, for example, served to invest meaning and attribute values to the service that became embedded in their ways of doing.

Through the application of the space and place conceptual framework, the research team noted that by responding to the children and families at the service, the ECEC educators created ways of being and doing that reflect social justice even though they (the educators) may not recognize it as such. The educators were unable to articulate a direct definition of social justice or a sophisticated understanding of social justice; however, the educators’ sharing of experiences and practices demonstrated their agency and responsibility for many of the roles, resources and available relationships that supported social justice to be attended to and inquired about in the everyday life of their early learning place.

5. Discussion

This small-scale study structured an opportunity for educators, who typically are at the receiving end of education and training [39] to be authentically involved and share experiences and perspectives about working in rural and remote early childhood services. The research team experienced the framework of space and place as helpful in uncovering the importance of attending to everyday life in a place and how the rural communities of which the early learning places were a part of influence social justice teaching and learning. Place and space, as a lens, enabled the research team to see beyond the ways that early childhood educators were “doing within their environments”—to bring meaning to how they privilege social justice through, what Aoki describes as “a lived situation pregnantly alive in the presence of people” [45].

Social justice could be described in the five early childhood settings as responsive teaching through emphasizing children’s social–emotional and dispositional learning [11]. The language used by educators to define their perceptions and practices of social justice echoes the literature about social and emotional development in early childhood education and care. For example, the participants shared that their everyday life with the children involved teaching them to be self-aware and socially aware, to care for their own emotions and for the family, friends and community members around them and to develop responsible decision-making and sustained relationships, to think and engage more critically about ideas and with each other, as well as to take action [11,46].

Responsive teaching has provoked considerations of the disparity that exists between curriculum documents, policy and practice [3]. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia [47] recognizes and emphasizes the importance of social–emotional development, as well as encouraging reflective practices which draw upon “post-structuralist theories that offer insights into issues of [and implications for] power, equity and social justice in early childhood settings” (p. 11). The findings of this study suggest that presumptions of knowledge require further consideration as guidance for implementing social justice practices not explicitly stated. As early childhood settings seek to privilege socially just programs, educators preparing to lead learning programs for young children require more definitive understandings so as to explicitly integrate social justice into social emotional programming and practice. Ramirez [12] supports that until initial teacher education courses and early childhood curricula are intentionally designed and written, teachers “carry the responsibility” to interpret, frame and engage children in learning experiences that take into consideration “their cultural knowledge, experiences, and assets, and acknowledges and addresses the social injustices, inequalities, prejudices, and exclusions they face.”

6. Conclusions

This small-scale study was promising in inquiring into the research question: How do early childhood educators perceive ECEC services as places for privileging social justice in rural and remote communities? The findings and deeper interpretations showed that interviews allowed for the sharing of perspectives, philosophy, experiences and practices. To our knowledge, the theoretical framework of space and place has not been aligned with social justice in current research, therefore, there is a contribution to the literature and scholarly conversations. The space and place conceptual framework uncovered the importance of past experiences which teachers may feel to have influenced their beliefs about social justice and to better make sense of their lived experiences that shape their immediate behaviors and actions in their early learning environments.

The significance of the article is the focus on the process of inquiry of a small-scale project, as well as the outcomes of the research. We have contributed critical questions for ongoing inquiry, which can be applied in international contexts. The research is important for bringing pedagogical conversations to the forefront regarding practicing ECEC educators' perceptions of their role in shaping everyday lives for themselves and children and creating socially just learning places in rural and remote communities. These concluding reflections are offered not with the expectation of closing possibilities—other methodologies and conceptual frameworks would offer varying insights and conclusions—but rather as a potential point of departure for beginning new conversations and considering alternative conceptualizations of social justice and possibilities for practice in initial teacher education and in the ECEC sector.

The sample size was small, thus limiting generalizability while facilitating consideration of context in the use of an alternative conceptual framework. A larger collection of narratives from a broader range of participants would allow for a deeper investigation of how ECEC educators working in rural and remote settings perceive ECEC services as places for social justice.

Empirically studying teacher perceptions and experiences challenged us to consider that the responses of the teacher participants may not have reflected their actual beliefs or practices. Their rich recollections of practice were valued, yet future research will be designed to address this concern in the collection of data on teacher thinking. The data from observations of practice and stimulated recall sessions, for example, would provide insights into the immediate behaviors of teacher participants in their settings. Using multiple research methods would enable comparisons between data to broaden findings and strengthen descriptions and interpretations of the teachers' perceptions and experiences, as opposed to relying on a single data source.

The use of this framework in social justice research in early learning environments has global implications, and the study provokes important considerations for future work. Notions of social justice remain central to the ECEC educators' practices and relationships in their rural communities, however, the small-scale study revealed that a clear definition of social justice remains elusive. This small-scale study generated new questions to sustain ongoing research about ECEC educators' social justice perspectives and practices in rural and remote communities: Is social justice a concept to understand by definition, or is social justice a process to be lived in early childhood services, and what does that mean for the professional learning of educators focused on social justice? In what ways can educators inquire into topics of social justice that are afforded by the inhabitants of their ECEC service and their immediate rural and remote communities?

Without attending to curriculum and policy, addressing social justice in rural and remote ECEC learning places would only be seen merely as pedagogical "and linked to the educators' personal biographies, knowledge, skills and dispositions as a pedagogue" [38]. Ongoing research would include an inquiry question asking, what is the role of curriculum, policy and other guiding documents in teaching and learning social justice with young children in rural and remote communities?

The social justice program of research of the project team is in its early stages. Ongoing work is not described in this article. The findings of the research generated new questions for timely research about professional qualifications and initial teacher education programs. If social justice learning is reconsidered in terms of “everyday life” in a place and as the “whole experience of being there”, when and how is social justice addressed in ECEC initial teacher education courses and professional learning programs (Nolan and Lamb, 2019)? What is the stance taken toward social justice? In what ways is social justice theorized with links to leadership in courses across preservice programs? How is the course content and assessment about social justice in initial teacher education programs connected to the context of teaching and learning in diverse rural communities? Who bears responsibility for social justice [48]? Through readers’ responses and interpretations of this article, we envisage that further provocative ideas and questions about practice and research will be generated about social justice and ECEC in diverse rural and remote communities.

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