



Research Article

Volume-07/Issue-07/2026

Perception Is Not Provision: Early Childhood Educators' Views of Early Literacy and the Conditions of Quality Instruction in Urban Labasa, Fiji

Fozia Farzana Begum

Labasa Campus, Fiji National University, Labasa, Fiji

Article History

Received: 08.06.2026

Accepted: 10.07.2026

Published: 14.07.2026

Citation

Begum, F. F. (2026). Perception Is Not Provision: Early Childhood Educators' Views of Early Literacy and the Conditions of Quality Instruction in Urban Labasa, Fiji. *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7(7):12-20.

Abstract: Early literacy is recognised globally as fundamental to subsequent educational outcomes; nevertheless, the circumstances that enable early life educators to implement a reading-rich pedagogy are inconsistently documented in Pacific Island environments. This paper analyses the beliefs of early childhood education (ECE) teachers regarding early literacy in urban Labasa, located on Fiji's island of Vanua Levu, and how these perceptions align with the material and institutional conditions of their classrooms. A descriptive cross-sectional survey with open-response items was conducted among ECE instructors in the urban centres of the Macuata school district; 13 of 15 invited teachers participated, resulting in an 87% response rate. Likert-scale items were summarised using frequencies and percentages, whereas open replies were examined thematically. The results indicate a near-universal normative agreement on the significance of early literacy: all thirteen participants affirmed its relevance, and 84.6% strongly concurred that a designated reading place facilitates literacy development. That accord, however, exists alongside a commonly stated limitation: 92.3% concurred or highly concurred that they encounter difficulties in executing early literacy for effective instruction, with classroom space, resources, and adult-child ratios frequently cited as the identified impediments. The consensus indicates that when the claim is pedagogically specific, there is a balanced distribution of strong agreement and agreement regarding the influence of the design and layout of the literate environment on instructional quality, with one respondent dissenting. The paper contends that in this context, the limiting factor on early literacy is not teacher belief but rather resource allocation. Teachers possess the disposition that policy discourse necessitates; nevertheless, they lack the requisite material infrastructure, planning time, and optimal ratios to actualize that disposition. Interventions aimed at altering teacher attitudes are likely to be poorly targeted. The study concludes by advocating a shift in ECE policy in Fiji from awareness-raising to provision, and for research methodologies that observe teachers' actions rather than merely their endorsements.

Keywords: Early literacy; early childhood education; teacher perception; quality instruction; learning environment; Fiji; Pacific education

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

INTRODUCTION

The preschool years are now widely understood as the period in which children construct their earliest working theories about what print is, what it does, and what it is for. Long before formal reading instruction begins, children come to understand that marks on a page carry meaning, that those marks can be produced as well as received, and that the messages they encode can be used to do things in the social world. Alatalo and Westlund (2021) situate this period as decisive precisely because much of what is acquired in it occurs incidentally, through the ordinary transactions of a print-rich environment rather than through explicit teaching. Children who arrive at school already familiar with printing with books, labels, signs, large-format text and the routines that surround them are better positioned to make sense of the reading instruction they will receive.

The developmental account that underpins this claim has been stable for some decades. Morrow's (2001) trajectory from emergent writing, in which symbolic mark-making grows out of play and social interaction, through to increasingly autonomous orthographic

expression as children acquire the conventions of the writing system. Snow (2017) identifies the constituent competencies of effective early literacy instruction: phonological awareness, phonics for both reading and spelling, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension and composition and argues that these are best integrated within a research-informed, balanced framework that is age-appropriate and that draws on the knowledge children already bring with them from home and community.

This literature establishes that early literacy is environmentally mediated. It is produced not principally by instruction in the narrow sense but by the ambient conditions of the setting: the availability of books, the presence of a reading corner, the density and quality of adult-child talk, the opportunity for children to encounter print in the course of play. This has an implication that is frequently stated and rarely followed through. If early literacy is environmentally mediated, then a teacher's capacity to deliver it is a function of the environment in which she works, not only of what she believes about literacy. Belief and provision are analytically distinct, and they can come apart.

The international policy literature on early childhood education has tended not to hold them apart. A large proportion of intervention design in this field proceeds on the assumption that the limiting factor is teacher knowledge, teacher attitude, or teacher disposition, that if practitioners can be persuaded of the importance of early literacy, and equipped with strategies for delivering it, quality instruction will follow. Torii *et al.* (2017) note that quality, understood as the interaction between adult and child rather than as structural inputs alone, is what distinguishes early childhood provision that produces durable gains from provision that does not. The commonly drawn inference is that quality is a property teachers instantiate. The inference less commonly drawn is that structural inputs are what make that instantiation possible, and that where the inputs are absent, teacher disposition will not substitute for them.

This article takes that distinction as its point of departure. It reports a descriptive survey of early childhood educators working in Labasa, the administrative and commercial centre of the Macuata district on Vanua Levu, Fiji's second island. The study asks what these teachers perceive early literacy to be and to require, how they understand the relationship between the physical literacy environment and the quality of their instruction, and what they identify as the constraints on establishing the environments they describe as desirable. The setting matters. Labasa's urban ECE centres operate under resourcing conditions that differ materially from those assumed in the Anglophone literature from which the early literacy guidance derives, and the transferability of that guidance is not self-evident.

The article is structured as follows. The institutional and geographic context is examined, relevant literature is reviewed, and the conceptual framework is delineated. The methodology is described, its limitations are explicitly stated, the findings are presented, and the central argument is developed, asserting that, in this context, the binding constraint is the provision rather than perception. The implications for policy are discussed, the study's substantial limitations are outlined, and a conclusion is drawn.

The setting: Urban ECE Provision in the Macuata District

Fiji's Northern Division comprises the islands of Vanua Levu and Taveuni together with their surrounding smaller islands, and for administrative purposes in education, it is served by the Macuata/Bua education district. Labasa is the principal urban settlement in that district. The concentration of ECE centres in and around the town, and the relative absence of alternatives beyond it, make urban Labasa a bounded and analytically tractable site: the centres serve an identifiable population, draw on a shared pool of trained practitioners, and operate under a common district administration.

Table 1: Administrative Location of the Study Site

Division	Education district	Study site
Northern	Macuata / Bua	Urban centres, Labasa

Note. Fiji's Northern Division is served by a single education district for administrative purposes, which defines the sampling frame used in this study.

Site selection proceeded through consultation with head teachers known to the researcher, who advised on which centres would be appropriate to approach and which would yield variation in institutional size. Centres were deliberately selected to differ in scale, on the reasoning that teachers in larger and smaller centres would face different resourcing profiles and would therefore report different constraints. This is a purpose rather than a probabilistic strategy, and its consequences for inference are addressed.

Two features of the Fijian ECE landscape bear on the interpretation of what follows and should be stated at the outset. The first is the workforce composition: early childhood teaching in Fiji, as in most jurisdictions, is heavily feminised, and the sample obtained here reflects that rather than departing from it. The second is that the standards movement in early childhood education, the specification of curriculum content and expected child outcomes, has reached the sector comparatively recently, and its arrival has not been accompanied by a commensurate expansion of the material provision needed to meet those standards. Where a gap opens between what is expected of a sector and what is supplied to it, practitioners absorb it. Part of the purpose of this study is to make the absorption visible.

LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Emergent Literacy as a Developmental Continuum

The construct of emergent literacy displaced an earlier reading-readiness paradigm by rejecting the premise that literacy development begins at the point of formal instruction. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) argued that the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are developmental precursors to conventional reading and writing form a continuum with reading and writing themselves, rather than a preparatory stage prior to them. The practical consequence is that everything a child encounters in an ECE setting that involves print, or talk about print, is literacy instruction, whether or not it is labelled as such.

Snow's (2017) synthesis is useful for its refusal to collapse the constituent competencies into one another. Phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension and composition develop on partly independent schedules and respond to partly different pedagogical affordances. Vocabulary growth is

driven principally by the volume and quality of adult-child talk; phonological awareness responds to explicit and playful attention to the sound structure of language; comprehension depends on background knowledge that is built discursively over long periods. A setting can be rich in one and impoverished in another. This matters for the present study because it means that the adequacy of a literacy environment cannot be assessed by any single indicator, the presence of a reading corner, for instance, and that teachers who report a reading corner as beneficial are making a narrower claim than the one policy sometimes hears them making.

The Environment as Pedagogical Text

A second body of work treats the physical arrangement of the early childhood setting as itself pedagogical. Learning areas stocked with attractive, colourful and manipulable resources generate the talk from which vocabulary is built. A library corner with large-format picture books invites the picture-talk and shared reading that Alatalo and Westlund (2021) identify as the principal mechanism of read-aloud benefit. Print displayed at child height, labelled resources, and writing materials available in play areas all recruit children into transactions with print that are not experienced as instruction.

The theoretical warrant for this is sociocultural. Vygotsky's (1978) account of mediated learning holds that higher psychological functions are first constituted in social interaction and are only subsequently internalised; on this reading, the environment is not the backdrop to learning but the medium of it. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model further points out that the immediate setting is itself nested within institutional and policy layers that determine what the setting can contain. A reading corner is a microsystem feature. Whether it exists is an ecosystem question, a matter of budgets, of floor area, of procurement, over which the teacher who would benefit from it has little control. Holding these two levels together is the analytical work this article attempts.

Teacher Perception and the Enactment of Practice

The literature on teacher beliefs generally finds that beliefs and practices are related but loosely coupled, and that this coupling is further loosened by constraints. Teachers who hold sophisticated views about literacy pedagogy may nonetheless deliver narrow instruction where class sizes, timetable or resource scarcity make the sophisticated version impracticable. Sylva *et al.* (2010), reporting the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education evidence, found that the settings producing the strongest child outcomes combined trained staff with structural conditions, such as space and materials, that permitted sustained shared thinking. Neither element sufficed alone.

The requirement for specifically qualified early childhood practitioners is a persistent theme in this

literature, and it is a legitimate one. But it is worth being precise about what the qualification does. Qualification raises the ceiling on what a teacher can do; it does not raise the floor established by the conditions in which she works. Where the floor is high, small groups, adequate materials, protected planning time, and variation in qualification explain a good deal of the variance in child outcomes. Where the floor is low, it explains less, because the practices that qualification enables cannot be performed. The present study is conducted in a setting where the floor is, on the teachers' own account, low.

Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

The study is framed by the distinction between perception and provision. Perception denotes what teachers believe early literacy to be, what they believe it requires, and what value they attach to it. Provision denotes the material, institutional and temporal conditions that determine whether those beliefs can be enacted: floor area, furniture, books and manipulables, adult-child ratio, planning time, administrative support and professional development. Quality instruction is theorized as the joint product of the two, such that provision constrains the maximum quality attainable and perception determines how much of that maximum is realised. Where provision is low, improvements in perception yield little; where provision is high, perception becomes the operative variable.

This framing generates the questions the study addresses:

- What are ECE teachers' perceptions of early literacy in urban schools in Labasa?
- How do teachers understand the relationship between the literacy environment and their instructional practice?
- What constraints do teachers identify on the creation of an optimal literacy learning environment?
- To what extent do teachers' perceptions and their reported conditions of work diverge, and what follows for policy?

METHODOLOGY

Design

The study employs a descriptive cross-sectional survey design with embedded open-response items. A descriptive design is appropriate when the aim is to characterise the distribution of perceptions within a defined population rather than to estimate causal effects or test differences between groups (Dannels, 2018). Bloomfield and Fisher (2019) note that the choice of design should follow from the research problem rather than preceding it; here the problem establishing what teachers in a bounded setting perceive, and what they say constrains them is descriptive in form, and the design follows accordingly.

It is necessary to be explicit about what this design cannot do, because the temptation to over-read small descriptive datasets is considerable. The study

cannot establish that perceptions differ by gender, age or years of experience: the sample achieved is too small to support subgroup comparison, no inferential tests were conducted, and none would be interpretable if they were. Nor can it establish that reported perceptions correspond to observed practice, since no observational data were collected. The claims advanced are accordingly claims about the internal structure of what teachers report, and about what that structure implies for the targeting of policy, not claims about behaviour or about causation.

Setting, Population and Sample

The sampling frame comprised of in-service ECE teachers employed in centres located within urban Labasa. Fifteen teachers, drawn from several centres at a rate of two to three per centre, were invited to participate. Thirteen returned completed instruments, a response rate of 86.7%. All analyses reported below are conducted on the thirteen achieved responses. Selection considered years of service and the teacher's training status at the time of the study, with the intention of securing variation on both.

The achieved sample is described in Table 2. It is overwhelmingly female (12 of 13), reflecting the composition of the ECE workforce rather than a sampling artefact, and it is experienced: the range of service runs from 6 to 29 years, with the modal band falling between 10 and 20 years. No respondent was under 26 years of age. This has a bearing on the interpretation, which cuts in two directions. On one hand, the sample is well placed to report on constraints, since its members have observed the sector over long periods and have accumulated a basis for comparison. On the other, an experienced sample may have normalised conditions that a newly qualified teacher would find remarkable and may under-report constraint for that reason.

Table 2: Characteristics of the Achieved Sample (N = 13)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	12	92.3
Male	1	7.7
Age band (years)		
26–30	2	15.4
31–34	2	15.4
35–40	9	69.2
Teaching experience (years)		
Range	6–29	,
Modal band	10–20	,

Note. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place and may not sum to 100. Age bands follow the categories used in the survey instrument (Appendix A). Experience was collected as a continuous variable and is summarised here as a range and a modal band because the cell counts do not support a finer partition.

Instrument

Data was collected using a researcher-designed instrument administered through an online form. Part A collected demographic information: gender, age band and years of teaching experience. Part B comprised eighteen statements to which respondents indicated their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree), together with open-response fields inviting elaboration. The full instrument is reproduced as Appendix A.

Five items are reported in full in article. These were selected in advance as bearing directly on the research questions: the value ascribed to early literacy, the perceived benefit of a designated reading area, the presence of implementation challenges, the planning demands of literacy guidelines, and the perceived relationship between environmental design and instructional quality. Responses to the remaining items are drawn on in the qualitative synthesis where they illuminate the reported constraints, but are not tabulated, because with thirteen respondents the marginal information contained in each additional tabulated distribution is small and the risk of spurious pattern-finding is not.

The instrument was not formally validated, and no reliability coefficient is reported. The items were not designed as a scale; they do not measure a single latent construct, and summing them would not be meaningful. They are treated here as separate indicators, each interpreted on their own terms. This is a limitation, and it is stated rather than mitigated.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants received the survey link via email after providing consent. Each survey item was configured as a discrete variable within the form, and responses were exported to a database for analysis. Data collection was structured across a fifteen-week schedule, summarised in Table 3, which allocated distinct periods to instrument development, participant approval, distribution, response, collation, analysis and write-up. The value of an explicit schedule in a study conducted alongside full-time teaching duties is practical rather than methodological: it partitions the work into tractable components and reduces the risk that data collection is compressed into a window too narrow to accommodate non-response follow-up.

Table 3: Study Schedule

Weeks	Activity
1–4	Instrument development
3–5	Participant approval and consent
4–5	Questionnaire distribution
5–9	Response window
8–10	Collation of returns
8–13	Data analysis
12–14	Write-up
15	Submission

Note. Activity windows overlap by design; collation proceeded concurrently with the response window to permit follow-up of non-respondents.

Analysis

Likert responses were summarised as frequencies and percentages. No measures of central tendency are reported for these items, since the response categories are ordinal and, with thirteen cases, a means would convey a precision the data do not possess. No inferential tests were performed. Open responses were analysed thematically following the recursive procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the corpus, generation of initial codes, collation of codes into candidate themes, review of themes against the coded extracts, and definition of the final themes. Content analysis was used to organize the responses to the open-ended items, with coding conducted by the researcher alone; no second coder was available, and no inter-rater agreement statistic is therefore reported.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were advised of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw. Identifying information was not required; the name field on the instrument was optional, and no participant is identifiable in any material reported here. Responses were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher. Institutional ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection.

A Note on the Design's Original Framing

This study was originally conceived as a mixed-methods study, incorporating interviews and classroom observation alongside the survey. In the event, only survey data, Likert items and their attached open responses, were obtained within the available period. The design is therefore reported here as what it is: a descriptive survey with a qualitative component internal to the instrument. The absence of observational data is the study's most consequential limitation and is returned. It is recorded here because a design should be described by what it delivered rather than by what it intended.

FINDINGS

The findings are structured according to the three principal study questions. The reports regarding instructors' perceptions of early literacy and its value; The reports provide their account of the environment. The reports delineate the limits they discover. Table 4 presents the full distribution for the five focal items.

Table 4: Distribution of Responses to Focal Items (N = 13)

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. Early literacy is important for ECE	12 (92.3)	1 (7.7)	0	0	0
2. A designated reading area fosters literacy development	11 (84.6)	2 (15.4)	0	0	0
3. ECE teachers face challenges implementing early literacy for quality instruction	9 (69.2)	3 (23.1)	1 (7.7)	0	0
4. Maintaining proper literacy guidelines requires necessary planning	9 (69.2)	4 (30.8)	0	0	0
5. The design and layout of the literacy environment impacts quality of instruction	6 (46.2)	6 (46.2)	0	1 (7.7)	0

Note. Cell entries are n (%). SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neither agree nor disagree; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree. Percentages are rounded and may not sum to 100.

A Normative Consensus on the Value of Early Literacy

Agreement that early literacy matters is effectively total. Twelve of thirteen respondents strongly agreed that early literacy is important in early childhood education, and the thirteenth agreed; no respondent was neutral or dissented (Item 1). This is the least surprising result in the study and, read in isolation, the least informative. Its analytical value lies in what it rules out.

Whatever is limiting the delivery of early literacy in these centres, it is not that teachers are unpersuaded of its importance.

The open responses give this consensus content. Respondents described literacy as something that begins at birth and develops continuously thereafter, and as something that permeates every learning area rather than occupying a discrete slot in the timetable. Play was

named repeatedly as the medium of literacy learning: children learn by talking about what they encounter, and the teacher's work is to arrange encounters worth talking about. Learning areas set up with colourful and attractive resources were described as generating conversation and thereby building communication skills. Both indoor and outdoor spaces were understood as a literacy space. Reading storybooks and conducting picture-talk were identified as particularly effective because children engage more readily when exploring something new.

Phonological awareness is featured as a distinct concern. Respondents described the recognition and articulation of letter sounds as a foundation on which further literacy is built, consistent with Snow's (2017) account of phonological awareness as a constituent competency with its own developmental logic. Alongside this, respondents emphasised the primacy of children's interest in the selection of strategy and content, on the grounds that instruction which does not engage interest produces boredom and therefore, by their account, produces nothing. Parental involvement was raised spontaneously by several respondents, who traced the origins of literacy in the home and argued that the frequency of parent-child interaction determines the vocabulary a child brings to the centre.

What is notable about this account is its sophistication. It is not a thin or instrumental view of literacy. It is broadly consonant with the emergent literacy paradigm (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), with sociocultural theories of mediated learning, and with the balanced framework Snow (2017) advocates. These teachers are not describing a practice they need to be taught; they are describing one they have already theorised.

The Environment: Endorsed in General, Contested in Particular

Eleven of thirteen respondents strongly agreed, and the remaining two agreed, that a designated reading area in the classroom is beneficial for fostering literacy development (Item 2). Agreement here is unanimous in direction, and its strength is high. Respondents elaborated on the mechanism: a library corner stocked with large, colourful pictures attract children's interest, and interest is the precondition of the talk through which literacy grows.

Item 5 is the more interesting result and the one that breaks the pattern. Asked whether the design and layout of the literacy environment impact the quality of instruction, respondents split evenly between strong agreement ($n = 6$, 46.2%) and agreement ($n = 6$, 46.2%), with one respondent disagreeing (7.7%). This is the only item in the set to attract dissent, and the only one on which strong agreement fails to command a majority.

The distinction between Items 2 and 5 repays attention, because at first glance they appear to say the

same thing. They do not. Item 2 asks whether a specific and familiar environmental feature, a reading corner, supports children's literacy. Item 5 asks whether the design and layout of the environment shape the quality of the teacher's instruction. The first is a claim about children; the second is a claim about teaching, and it implies that a teacher's instructional quality is contingent on conditions she does not fully control. It is not difficult to see why an experienced practitioner might hesitate before that proposition or reject it. To affirm it is to concede that one's professional performance is bounded by the room one is given. The single dissenting response and the softened agreement of six others may register something more substantial than measurement noise: a professional reluctance to locate the determinants of one's own instructional quality outside oneself.

Constraint: Space, Resources and Ratio

Twelve of thirteen respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ECE teachers face challenges in implementing early literacy for quality instruction, with 69.2% strongly agreeing and one respondent neutral (Item 3). No respondent disagreed. When the open responses are read against this item, three constraints occur.

The first is physical space. Respondents described classroom limitations that make the establishment of dedicated learning areas difficult: where floor area is insufficient, a reading corner competes with the space required for other activities, and the environment that Item 2 endorses in principle cannot be constructed in practice. The second is financial. Resources books, manipulables, display materials, and the colourful, attractive stock that respondents identified as the engine of literacy talk must be procured, and respondents reported that funding for their procurement is inadequate. The two constraints compound: a resource-rich corner requires both the resources and somewhere to put them.

The third is the adult-child ratio. The instrument included an item on teacher-child ratio as a factor affecting instructional quality (Appendix A, Item 15), and respondents' engagement with it was consistent with the wider literature on the ratio-dependence of sustained shared thinking (Sylva *et al.*, 2010). Picture-talk, shared reading, and the extended conversational turns through which vocabulary is built are activities that scale badly. They require an adult who can attend to a small number of children for an extended period without interruption. Where ratios are unfavorable, the pedagogy respondents describe as effective is not available to them, irrespective of what they believe about it.

A fourth theme, distinct in kind from the preceding three, concerns planning. Nine respondents strongly agreed, and four agreed that maintaining proper literacy guidelines requires necessary planning (Item 4); agreement was again unanimous in direction.

Respondents framed guidelines positively, as an aid to planning rather than an imposition upon it: clear guidelines permit coherent planning, and coherent planning benefits children. What the item does not establish, and what the instrument was not designed to establish, is whether the planning time that guidelines require is, in fact, provided. The item measures demand. Whether the demand is met is a separate question, and one that the present data cannot answer.

Respondents also reported pressure from the primary sector, describing instances in which primary teachers attribute children's literacy deficits to inadequate preparation in ECE. This is worth recording because of its structural position: it locates accountability for literacy outcomes in the ECE classroom while the resources that would enable those outcomes are determined elsewhere. Responsibility, in this account, has been decentralized to teachers while control over the conditions of its discharge has not.

DISCUSSION

The Binding Constraint Is Provision, Not Perception

The central finding of this study is a mismatch between the diagnosis embedded in prevailing policy discourse and the situation that discourse purports to describe. Policy directed at early literacy in early childhood settings very often takes the form of awareness-raising: workshops on the importance of literacy, professional development on literacy strategies, and communication of the value of literacy to educators and stakeholders. The instrument used here contained items on precisely these interventions, and respondents endorsed them. But the data assembled in Section 5 indicate that awareness is not scarce in this population. It is saturated. All thirteen respondents affirmed the importance of early literacy; all thirteen affirmed the value of a designated reading area; their open responses articulate a theory of literacy development that is continuous, play-mediated, socially constituted and attentive to phonological awareness, vocabulary and interest.

What is scarce is provision. Twelve of thirteen report challenges in implementing early literacy for quality instruction, and the challenges they name, space, funding, ratio, are structural features of their working conditions rather than deficits in their understanding. An intervention that supplies more of what is abundant and none of what is scarce will not raise instructional quality. This is not an argument against professional development, which raises the ceiling on what a well-provisioned teacher can accomplish. It is an argument about sequence and about targeting. Where the floor is low, ceiling-raising interventions are inefficient.

The implication for the framing set out in Section 3.4 is direct. Quality instruction was theorized as the joint product of perception and provision, with provision setting the attainable maximum. In this sample,

perception is at or near its maximum and provision is reported as constraining. The marginal return to further investment in perception is therefore low, and the marginal return to investment in provision is correspondingly high. The policy conclusion follows without much additional argument.

Reading the Dissent on Item 5

The one place where consensus fractures is instructive, and it warrants an interpretation more careful than the small numbers might seem to license. Item 5 asks teachers to affirm that the design and layout of the environment impact the quality of their instruction. Six affirm it strongly, six affirm it, one denies it.

One reading is a measurement error, and with thirteen respondents, this reading cannot be excluded. But a second reading is available and is more consistent with the rest of the data. Items 1 through 4 ask teachers to endorse propositions about literacy, about children, and about the demands the system places on them. Item 5 asks them to endorse a proposition about the limits of their own professional efficacy. To agree strongly that layout determines instructional quality is to accept that one's teaching is bound by an infrastructure one did not choose. Professional identity resists that concession. The pattern in Table 4, near-unanimous strong agreement collapsing to a fifty-fifty split precisely at the item that implicates teacher autonomy, is what one would expect if respondents were distinguishing between constraint on children's learning, which they readily acknowledge, and constraint on their own practice, which they acknowledge more reluctantly.

If that reading is correct, it strengthens rather than weakens the argument of Section 6.1. Teachers may be systematically disposed to under-report the extent to which conditions bound their practice, because the alternative is to concede a diminished professional agency. The constraint reported in Section 5.3, on this account, is a floor rather than a ceiling on the true magnitude of the problem. This remains a hypothesis. It is testable, and Section 7 indicates how.

SITUATING THE FINDINGS

These results are consistent with the broader evidence on what distinguishes effective early childhood provision. Sylva *et al.* (2010) found that structural conditions and staff quality operate jointly, and that neither compensates for the absence of the other. Torii *et al.* (2017) locate quality in the character of adult-child interaction, which is precisely what unfavourable ratios and impoverished environments make unavailable. Alatalo and Westlund (2021) identify read-alouds as a principal vehicle of early literacy and language development, an activity that presupposes both books and an adult with time to read them.

What the Labasa data add is a specification of where, in one Pacific setting, the chain breaks. It does not

break at the point of teacher belief. It breaks at the point where belief must be converted into a room with books in it and an adult free to sit in that room with three children rather than eighteen. Whether this pattern generalises across Fiji's ECE sector or across comparable Pacific jurisdictions cannot be established from 13 respondents in one district. That it holds here is established, and it is sufficient to raise a question about the targeting of interventions designed on the contrary assumption.

Implications

Four implications follow, stated with confidence proportionate to the evidence.

- *Redirect investment towards provision.* Where teacher endorsement of early literacy is already near-universal, resources allocated to awareness-raising displace resources that could be allocated to books, materials, furniture and floor area. The displacement is not neutral.
- *Treat ratio as a literacy variable.* The adult-child ratio is generally implemented for supervision and safety. The evidence on sustained shared thinking indicates that it is also, and perhaps principally, a determinant of the language environment. It should be reported and monitored as such.
- *Protect planning time explicitly.* Respondents unanimously affirmed that literacy guidelines require planning. Guidelines that arrive without a corresponding allocation of non-contact time transfer the cost of compliance to teachers' unpaid hours, and the compliance so obtained is unlikely to be of high quality.
- *Reconsider the location of accountability.* Where ECE teachers are held answerable by the primary sector for literacy outcomes whose material preconditions are set by district and ministry budgets, accountability has been assigned without corresponding authority. Aligning the two is a governance question rather than a pedagogical one.

These recommendations are advanced as reasoned inferences from a small descriptive study, not as findings. They identify where a larger and better-designed investigation should look.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The limitations of this study are substantial and sharply constrain its claims.

Sample size and inference. Thirteen respondents in one district cannot support generalisation to Fiji's ECE sector, and no such claim is made. Each respondent accounts for 7.7% of the sample, so a single response shifts any percentage by nearly 8 points. The percentages reported in Table 4 should be interpreted as descriptions of this sample, not as estimates of a population parameter. No subgroup analyses by gender, age, or experience are reported because none would be interpretable: with only one male respondent, any gender comparison would be between a group and an individual.

Absence of observational data. The study measures what teachers report believing. It does not measure what they do. The distinction is fundamental to the argument, since the perception-provision framework asserts that belief and practice come apart under constraint, and the study is not designed to observe the coming-apart. This is the most consequential gap. A study capable of testing the argument would pair the survey with structured classroom observation, using an established environment rating instrument, so that reported perception could be set against measured environmental quality and observed practice.

Instrument. The instrument was researcher-designed and not validated. No reliability statistics are reported, and the items were not constructed on a scale. Coding of open responses was conducted by a single researcher without a second coder, so no inter-rater agreement can be reported. Social desirability is a live concern for items that ask teachers to affirm the importance of literacy: the near unanimity on Item 1 is precisely the result one would expect from a socially desirable response set, and the design cannot distinguish it from sincere endorsement.

Self-report and positionality. The researcher is professionally connected to the sector under study and secured access through head teachers known to her. This facilitated recruitment and may have shaped what respondents were willing to report, plausibly in the direction of under-reporting constraint.

Three directions for further work follow. First, a mixed-methods design pairing survey, observation, and semi-structured interviews would permit the perception-practice gap to be measured rather than inferred. Second, an audit of provision floor area, book counts, ratios, and planning time across a larger set of centres would establish whether the constraints reported here are typical of the district or particular to it. Third, the hypothesis advanced in Section 6.2, that teachers under-report environmental constraint on their own practice because doing so implicates their professional agency, is testable through interviews and through instruments that separate constraint on children from constraint on teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how early childhood educators in urban Labasa perceive early literacy and its relationship to the quality of their instruction. It found a workforce that, on its own account, is entirely persuaded. All thirteen respondents affirmed the importance of early literacy; all affirmed the value of a print-rich reading environment; and their elaborations articulate a developmental account of literacy that would not be out of place in the research literature from which early literacy policy is derived. The teachers in this sample do not require persuasion.

They report requiring something else. Twelve of thirteen described challenges in implementing early literacy for quality instruction, and the challenges they named were material: insufficient classroom space, inadequate funding for resources, and adult-child ratios that make the extended conversational pedagogy they describe as effective difficult to sustain. Where consensus fractured, it fractured at the single item asking teachers to concede that their own instructional quality is bounded by conditions they do not control a fracture that may say more about professional identity than about the underlying facts.

The argument for this article is therefore narrow but, within its scope, firm. Early literacy provision in these centres is not constrained by teachers' beliefs. It is limited by what they are given. A policy that continues to treat teacher perception as the variable requiring intervention will spend its resources on the abundant input and leave the scarce one untouched. Creating a learning environment that encourages high-quality instruction and optimizes children's achievement is, as this study's teachers evidently already understand, a matter of provision, and provision is a decision made by policymakers and stakeholders, not by the teachers who must work within it.

DECLARATIONS

Funding. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests. The author declares no competing interests.

Ethics approval. Ethical approval for this study was granted by [institutional ethics committee, reference number to be inserted]. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was preserved throughout.

Data availability. The anonymised dataset generated and analysed during the current study is available from the author on reasonable request. Individual responses are not publicly archived in order to protect participant confidentiality in a small professional community where re-identification would otherwise be feasible.

Use of generative artificial intelligence. A generative AI system was used to assist in paraphrasing and language correction. All data collection, analysis and interpretation were conducted by the author. The author reviewed and verified all content, including all

references, and takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

REFERENCES

1. Alatalo, T., & Westlund, B. (2021). Preschool teachers' perceptions about read-alouds as a means to support children's early literacy and language development. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 21(3), 413–435. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798419852136>
2. Bloomfield, J., & Fisher, M. J. (2019). Quantitative research design. *Journal of the Australasian Rehabilitation Nurses Association*, 22(2), 27–30.
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
4. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
5. Dannels, S. A. (2018). Research design. In G. R. Hancock, L. M. Stapleton, & R. O. Mueller (Eds.), *The reviewer's guide to quantitative methods in the social sciences* (2nd ed., pp. 402–416). Routledge.
6. Morrow, L. M. (2001). Literacy development in the early years: Helping children read and write. In *Handbook of instructional practices for literacy teacher-educators* (pp. 171–178). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410605214>
7. Neuman, S. B., & Dickinson, D. K. (Eds.). (2011). *Handbook of early literacy research* (Vol. 3). Guilford Press.
8. Snow, C. E. (2017). Early literacy development and instruction: An overview. In N. Kucirkova, C. E. Snow, V. Grøver, & C. McBride (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of early literacy education* (pp. 5–13). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315766027>
9. Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (Eds.). (2010). *Early childhood matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education project*. Routledge.
10. Torii, K., Fox, S., & Cloney, D. (2017). *Quality is key in early childhood education in Australia* (Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 01/2017). Mitchell Institute.
11. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
12. Whitehurst, G. J., & Lonigan, C. J. (1998). Child development and emergent literacy. *Child Development*, 69(3), 848–872. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1998.tb06247.x>