Invitation to Authors

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Welcome to the September edition of The Australian Journal of Early Childhood (AJEC). This is a groundbreaker in more ways than one.

Some perceptive readers may already have noticed that AJEC feels a little heavier than usual. Yes, the Journal has for first time been stepped up from its former 48 pages to a more substantial 60 page format. This is significant for Australia Early Childhood, not just because it reflects the continuing success of its flagship publication. It is also noteworthy because it signals the increasing and dynamic interest shown in the welfare of children. It is those who are actively researching in the field who contribute most of the content of AJEC, and it is the backlog of these papers that can now be addressed in the expanded format. Potential contributors may also be interested to learn that for some papers, it may be possible to negotiate with the edition editor to prepare a more substantial 6,000 word article for review, in lieu of the typical 3,000 to 3,500 word submission.

Not all the content of AJEC is devoted to research. The journal also provides an avenue for reviews of new books or other material (with input by Fleer for this edition). It also supports reflection, advocacy, and thoughtful comment on developments in early childhood, both nationally and internationally.

In keeping with these objectives, another innovation has been the introduction of a transcript of a recent speech. This will be a regular feature from now on.

Overall, the content of this unthemed September edition is rich and varied. The journal opens with a transcript of Michel’s speech in which the author employs a socio-political viewpoint as a tool to examine social policies and welfare state regimes.

Next, Goodfellow provides insights from grandparents about their roles as regular care providers. Her investigation shows that grandparents from all socio-economic backgrounds are making sacrifices that remain unappreciated. Cullen and Hedges examine the process of how children construct their knowledge base. Sims’ study of the perceptions of child care SUPS workers about their working environment reports some sobering views about the quality of some service delivery, with high stress levels and lack of staff support identified as key factors. Calabrese critiques the more directive, less play oriented approach of American special education. Readers may question whether these differences are still uncritically reflected in our own Australian culture. Clayton explores the effects of television-based video games such as Nintendo and Playstation, and concludes that parents are concerned about the effects of excessive use on their children’s physical and mental health. (Whether or not it is those children who already have behaviour difficulties who seek this kind of stimulation is not explored.) Potter and Briggs highlight the child’s perspective in their discussion of early school experiences. The final article by Jenvey, Windisch and Drysdale examines the views of Indigenous parents towards play, recreation, toy-making skills and Indigenous language.

A final note - the feedback to the editorial committee on the changes mentioned at the beginning of this editorial has been positive so far. On these and other innovations in content and format, we welcome your reactions, your comments, and other suggestions for moving forward.

Dr Chris Kilham
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Child care is a protean policy that lends itself to different framings and also to different policy goals. Feminists, for example, especially those of the second wave and those of a Marxist or socialist/social democratic persuasion, have, from the outset, assumed that child care was necessary to free women from the social assignment to motherhood and allow them to pursue occupational or educational goals. They have rarely succeeded in advocating for child care by using such rhetoric. Other rationales have included the demand for female labor (especially in wartime), the benefits to child development to be realized through child care, and, as I have just suggested, efforts to reduce poverty among women and children by encouraging or mandating mothers to work outside the home. Feminists seeking child care provisions have been more successful when they have allied with social actors advocating for child care on the basis of these other rationales. Some, as is probably obvious, are more congenial to feminists than others.

Interestingly, comparing the histories of child care policy across Western market democracies reveals that although some form of services that we might call child care existed as early as the eighteenth century, feminist demands for child care came rather late in the game, usually beginning in the 1970s. It was often the legacy of those provisions—what social scientists would call ‘policy feedback’—that feminists had to contend with.

For the most part, second-wave feminists were seeking some form of public child care: universal, affordable, high-quality, and necessarily state-sponsored, but often, as in Australia, community-controlled. But the legacy of earlier child care in most Western countries was some form of charitable child care—often custodial rather than ‘developmental’, and linked, in nearly every case, to the goals of poverty relief and moral reform of the poor. This was certainly true in the US and, from what I have learned, in Australia as well. While I am not suggesting that the late nineteenth or early twentieth-century origins of child care in these countries wholly determined late twentieth-century outcomes via some form of ‘path dependency’, I think we can argue that these early roots were hardly propitious for producing the kind of child care second-wave feminists had in mind. They are, ironically, not so foreign from the instrumental ways in which many welfare reformers currently think about child care.

What I’d like to do in the rest of this talk is briefly outline the current situation of child care in the US and Australia. Then, by comparing the histories of policymaking in the two countries, I will try to tease out some of the factors that explain why each society has the system of child care that it does. My purpose is not to declare one system superior to the other (though in the course of this talk I think that will become obvious), or to suggest that one country adopt wholesale the child care system of the other, since…
policy ‘transplants’ are usually quite difficult. Rather, it is a more modest one; to think about the lessons, both positive and negative, that might be learned from viewing these histories together. In this sense, I hope that my talk will make at least a small contribution to the ongoing dialogue between American and Australian feminists and policymakers that has been going on for at least a century.

So, what is the current situation of child care here and in the US? Let me begin with some general background about the two countries, starting with the labor force. As of 1994, rates of female labor force participation in the two countries were somewhat similar: 70.5 per cent for the US, 63.8 per cent for Australia (compared to about 85 per cent for men in both countries), with slightly lower rates for women with children. Women enter the labor force for many different reasons, but at least some of the increase has to do with the rise in single female-headed households: 26 per cent of all families in the U.S., slightly less than 20 per cent in Australia.

There is a bigger difference between the two countries in terms of the proportion of female workers employed part-time: 42.7 per cent for Australia, only 27.4 per cent for the US. These differences are due in part to the impact of economic shifts in the two countries, but they are also related to differences in public assistance policies for lone or single mothers, as well as the cost of child care.

Let me now turn to the child care situation in the two countries, starting with Australia (and I shall be most grateful for any corrections or supplements you would like to offer). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (thank heavens for the Internet!), as of 2002, 1.5 million Australian children—slightly less than half the child population—were in some kind of child care. Some 33 per cent of these were in informal care (down from 37 per cent in 1999), and 25 per cent were in formal care (up from 23 per cent in 1999). The rest were in a combination of the two. Much child care is government-sponsored through direct subsidies to parents and providers (on a sliding scale), and through indirect subsidies to employers. Despite this, Australian public expenditure for child care is amongst the lowest in the OECD (though still higher than the US).

In terms of types of care, much of it, as suggested by the statistics I just quoted, is informal. That can mean several things—increasingly, it means family members, but also family-based child care, which, in Australia, is still highly regulated and quite high in quality. Formal care consists of both commercial and non-profit services. Commercial services are now in the majority, and many are now based in workplaces and run by employers with government subsidies. Both commercial and non-profit services are subject to government regulation, and, from what I can gather, are distributed somewhat unevenly both geographically and demographically, with the result that rural and low-income populations tend to be under-served.

At present, the general rationale for child care in Australia is that it provides a service for parents who are employed or pursuing education. I shall have more to say about that when I get to my comparison of Australia and the US. Let me now turn to the current situation in the US.

In the US, as I mentioned earlier, rates of female labor force participation are higher than in Australia, and though rates for mothers with children are slightly lower than for all women, even these percentages are climbing. As of 1999, the labor force included 75 per cent of mothers with children 6-17, 64 per cent of mothers with preschool children, and 60 per cent of mothers of children under 2. Of these, half were working fulltime, 18 per cent part-time, and 30 per cent were looking for work. For mothers of preschool children, part time rates were higher at 41 per cent.

Patterns of child care usage in the US are remarkably similar to those in Australia: 36 per cent of American children are in informal care (cf. 33 per cent of Australian children in 2002, and 37 per cent in 1999), and 26 per cent in formal care (cf. 25 per cent of Australian children). As in Australia, many American children were cared for by relatives, in many cases, the other parent, which is a pattern especially prevalent for mothers who work part-time.

A major difference between the US and Australia is the mix of child care services and facilities. The US has very few of the community-based services for which Australia is famous. Rather, ours is a mix of voluntary
(church, synagogue, or civic-organization-based) and commercial provisions, with relatively few employer-sponsored or workplace-based. As in Australia, rural and low-income populations tend to be under-served; poor children are eligible to attend federally-sponsored Head Start programs, but these are not designed to serve as child care.

Another major difference is the form of government sponsorship. Whereas in Australia, subsidies for child care are distributed on a sliding scale, in the US, for the most part, there is a split between poor and low-income families, on the one hand, and middle and upper-income families on the other. Poor and low-income families and/or their providers receive direct subsidies. Middle and upper-income families receive tax credits. Despite these differences in form, however, as mentioned earlier, both countries are at the low end of the scale among OECD countries in terms of public expenditures for child care as a proportion of GDP (Australia's is 1.9 per cent, the US', 0.9 per cent).

With the current situation in mind, let us now examine comparatively the paths by which the two countries arrived at the policies they now have. (In this account, the information about the US is drawn from my own primary research (Michel, 1999), whereas for Australia I rely primarily on the excellent histories of child care by Deborah Brennan (Brennan, 1994, 2001), with which many of you are no doubt familiar).

As I suggested at the outset, the earliest forms of child care in the US and Australia, as in most other modern Western market democracies, arose from the concerns of social reformers and philanthropists. In the US, women philanthropists began by trying to find a way to help keep intact poor families that had lost the support of male breadwinners due to death, disability, drunkenness, or desertion. Notably, the goal here was to help families in crisis, not to enable women to gain equality in the labor market. These women subscribed to the notion that, in the best of circumstances, all children should have their mothers' care. Thus when they determined that a family no longer needed their services (because the father had either recovered, returned, sobered up, or risen from the dead), the child was dismissed from the nursery. Later (from the 1890s to the 1920s), when philanthropists added the goal of 'Americanising' the children of immigrants, they tended to stay in the nurseries for longer periods of time.

While in the US, the first nursery was established in the 1790s, services for Australian children did not appear until a few decades later with the advent of infant schools and 'ragged schools'. Here again, the motive was to help the children of the poor—in this case, often, the children of convicts—but also to maintain social order by removing orphans and neglected children—the infamous 'larrikins'—from the streets. While American day nurseries were founded and run almost exclusively by women, in Australia, male clergymen as well as female philanthropists were involved in this work.

In Australia these rudimentary services became incorporated into the burgeoning kindergarten movement by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the US, day nurseries and kindergartens remained more or less distinct, with the advocates of child care jealously guarding their status as 'professional amateurs' and maintaining their enterprises as private charities, while the kindergarteners sought professional credentials and public funding. As a result, American day nurseries became marginalised while their Australian counterparts, though still few and far between, avoided the stigmatisation that came from being compared unfavourably with kindergartens and nursery schools.

Child care did not become public policy in either country until much later. National differences in what happened to child care in the interim between the earliest charitable services and later provisions was, I would argue, decisive. In both cases, this had to do with the place of child care in the broader political context affecting women, including social policies and political rights. By the late nineteenth century, women in both the US and Australia were gaining access to higher education and also becoming increasingly active in the public sphere. In both countries, women were engaged in a variety of causes, some of them involving women's rights, specifically suffrage, and some of them social issues such as public support for mothers—what we called mothers' or widows' pensions, and what you called 'motherhood endowment.'
Historians have devoted much attention to this period of lively reform, debating the meaning of women’s activities for gender equality. The terminology here is complicated, but for the most part, historians distinguish between maternalists—middle-class women using their identity as mothers to develop programs and policies for the health and welfare of poor women and children—and feminists—women seeking to break down the differences between the sexes as a way of gaining equal political rights for women. In practice, the two groups were not always fully distinct. Many individual activists worked on both sides, and for this reason some historians refer to them as ‘social justice feminists’. But when it comes to child care, at any rate, I would argue that the term ‘maternalist’ is most useful.

While there were many similarities between women’s movements in the two countries, the outcomes were the mirror opposite: Australian women succeeded in winning the vote earlier than their American sisters (1902 for you, 1920 for us), and American women got widows’ and mothers’ pensions, at least on the state level, by the 1910s and 20s. Because of the rhetoric that drove the spread of mothers’ pensions, child care became further marginalised, and the possibility that it would gain state support seemed to foreclose indefinitely. The rationale advanced by the advocates of mothers’ pensions was that motherhood was a ‘service to the state’ and thus, when a mother had no (male) breadwinner to support her, the state should step in to allow her to remain at home and care for her children, rather than seeking paid employment. If poor mothers did not have to work, there was no need for day nurseries.

In practice, of course, mothers’ pensions did not obviate the need for maternal employment because, for a variety of reasons, the majority of poor mothers did not receive pensions or what they got was not adequate to support them and their families, so they had to work anyway. For many decades, the existence of pensions, coupled with the culture of America’s ‘male breadwinner regime’, kept child care off the public agenda for all intents and purposes.

In Australia, by contrast, the failure of efforts to legislate an endowment of motherhood, despite repeated efforts on the part of several generations of women activists, left child care in a less marginalised, though hardly honorific position. In Australia, perhaps even more than the US, the (male) ‘worker-citizen’ held political pride of place and served to shore up the male breadwinner regime, de-emphasizing women’s right to work. Without a motherhood endowment or maternity allowance as a resource for poor women, child care retained its place in the panoply of Australian social provisions. Although few in number, day nurseries persisted and, in the 1930s and 1940s, gained new respect, first for the health benefits they could offer children, and then, of course, for the role they played in helping the Australian war effort.

In Australia, married women also remained in the labor force after the war, shifting from industrial work to the expanding service sector. Despite their high rates of employment, combined with the postwar baby boom, the child care issue did not appear on the national agenda until 1972, when it was introduced not by second-wave feminists (who had by then become active) but by conservatives who were concerned with the growing shortage of labor. The ministers made it clear that they were supporting child care in order to address ‘a somewhat unfortunate social necessity’, not to promote gender equity. At the same time, however, feminists seized the issue and put their own stamp on it. According to Deborah Brennan, they believed that ‘child care should not be provided simply to free women to work outside the home,…since “To only want child care on the grounds that it will give us a chance to prove we are as good as men in a man’s world is to entirely miss the point of the new feminism”’ (Brennan, 2002). The election of Labor’s Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister provided feminists with an unprecedented political opportunity, and Elizabeth Reid, his advisor on women’s affairs, oversaw the establishment of a national child care program based on democratic and feminist ideals. Reid responded to community groups’ demands for child care that was locally-based and federally-sponsored, but run by a partnership between parents and early childhood professionals.

Although this model became the signature of Australian child care, it did have certain disadvantages. The Federal Government would sponsor a child care
center only when a community took the initiative to establish one. Since working-class communities tended to be less mobilized and articulate on this score, they were less likely to take the necessary steps, with the result that such communities lacked adequate facilities. Nevertheless, the system was strong enough to withstand the privations imposed by the Conservative Fraser government, and, with the election of the Labor Hawke government in 1983, child care once again returned to the agenda. During this period, child care benefited from a burst of interest in women’s issues within the ALP, and the trade unions becoming part of the Accord to increase the number of jobs and expand the social wage.

By the mid-1980s, however, the positive energy toward child care began to dissipate. Although Labor was still in power, the emphasis now was on containing the cost of child care and equalizing access by ending state subsidies to the community-based child care centers. This was what neo-liberal critics called ‘middle-class welfare’, and leveling the playing field by offering operating subsidies to commercial providers as well. Over the vociferous opposition of the feminists and ACTU, the neo-liberals got their way. The ALP argued that commercial providers would save the government money by absorbing the burden of ‘start-up’ costs. As the supply of child care exploded, however, the government’s bill rose proportionately and ended up costing them far more than anticipated. Moreover, this rapid expansion had an ambiguous effect: the number of places soared from 50,000 in 1983 to 292,300 by 1996, but quality was uneven.

With the Conservative takeover in 1996, child care received another telling blow. The government eliminated operating subsidies altogether and, in an effort to give families ‘choice’, provided incentives to stay-at-home mothers. Two previous types of subsidies—child care assistance and the child care rebate—were now combined into one, the child care benefit, which the government claims is more lucrative for parents, but analysts argue does not make up for the previous funding losses. Child care centers have been forced to alter their payment scales, compelling many families to reduce the number of hours their children are in formal care and combine center care with other types of care, to the detriment of both children and the centers. (Centers’ overheads cannot be reduced significantly even if the number of children being served or the hours of opening are lowered.)

Meanwhile, in the US from the 1960s to the 1990s, the trajectory of child care policy looked strikingly different. The Federal Government’s interest in child care was almost entirely linked to efforts to reduce poverty and reform welfare. (The one exception to this pattern was the Comprehensive Child Care and Development Act, which passed Congress in 1971 but was vetoed by President Nixon.) Although many observers believe that the shift from welfare to workfare came in the 1990s, in fact, it began in the 1960s, when the Federal Government first began to explore ways to move welfare recipients into the labor force. Though not compulsory, as they are now, these early programs, including WIN (Work Incentive), foundered because policymakers failed to make adequate provision for child care. Congress was on course to repeat this mistake in the 1996 legislation, but ultimately, at President Clinton’s insistence, included substantial child care funds in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. This ended ‘welfare as we know it’ by placing a time limit on public assistance and making employment compulsory for parents, including those with pre-school children. Despite Clinton’s insistence, child care funding has proven to be inadequate, yet under the harsh terms of the law, parents are often ‘sanctioned’ for failing to find or keep jobs. Congress is currently debating renewal of this legislation, and while conservatives are seeking to increase the required hours of work (despite record-high rates of unemployment in the US), it is not clear that child care funding will be increased commensurably.

Thus, if we compare the two systems, we see that while Australian child care has been weakened considerably since the mid-1980s with lower subsidies, the growing predominance of commercial child care, and the shift from fulltime center-based to part time and informal care, the infrastructure of a universal, publicly subsidized national system remains, thus allowing for groups like ACTU to demand (as it did recently) 15 hours of free care for all parents with some reasonable expectation of fulfillment. In the US in the meantime,
public support for child care remains linked to welfare reform, with all of its attendant ills and complexities. The government continues to subsidize child care for middle and upper-income families through the dependent care tax credit. This does not come anywhere close to covering the actual cost of child care for most families, nor does it regulate the child care market, leaving issues of supply and quality to the vagaries of commerce.

For me, the question that remains is whether, given Australia’s recent commitment to its own version of welfare reform (influenced by the American neo-liberal Lawrence Mead), there are signs of convergence between Australian and American child care policy. Will Australia begin to link child care subsidies for poor and low-income parents to participation in mandatory employment (Australian welfare reform is, so far, rather gentle and benign in comparison to the American brand)? Or will subsidies remain universal and relatively unfettered? Or will other factors, like the declining birth rate, begin to weigh in?

No doubt you in the audience are more finely attuned to the current political climate here and can perhaps make some predictions. In the meantime, I can only hope that the roots of modern Australian child care in the community-based feminist initiatives of the 1970s will help your child care system to weather the current storm of neo-liberalism.

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References
Grandparents as regular child care providers: Unrecognised, under-valued and under-resourced

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In Australia, nearly one quarter of all 0-4-year-olds in child care are in the ‘informal’ care of grandparents (ABS, 2003). There is also evidence that the courts are assigning increasing numbers of children to the custodial care of grandparents. While there is a considerable body of descriptive literature that reports on the incidence and nature of grandparenting in relation to the custodial care of children, little is known about grandparents who are regular child care providers. This article draws from a larger study that sought to gain insights into grandparents’ experiences as regular child care providers for children below school age. While these grandparents chose to care for their grandchildren they were also involved in balancing this responsibility with their own work commitments, their leisure activities, and a sense of family obligation. The grandparents’ stories of their experiences highlight the need for greater recognition of the role grandparents play in supporting family cohesiveness and the contribution they make to society as a whole.

A story

My younger son was 21 and his wife 19 when they had their first child. They bought a house in the outer suburbs because that was all that they could afford. His wife was lonely. It was too far from friends and their family network. They only had one car. So they moved back into this area, which meant a larger mortgage. They were finding it difficult on one salary.

My son starts work at five in the morning and he’s home at two thirty. My daughter-in-law goes to work at three o’clock and works until half-past-eight. I said to them, ‘Look, I intend to retire…from my Senior Executive position…as soon as I hit fifty-five, so if you can just hang in there and do this until I retire then I’ll babysit full-time for you until my husband retires.’ I didn’t want them to have to wait for years and years before having another child and all her salary needing to go to child care.

In the meantime, my other son and his wife had a child which was not on the drawing board. So they said, ‘Well, we’ll take up the offer.’ And I thought, ‘Hang on, it wasn’t really an offer to you’, because I was offering to help my other son and his wife as she was only in the workforce for nine months before falling pregnant, so she had no skills and she was going back to a mediocre job. My other son had a good job and so did his wife. I wasn’t really planning to do it for them. However, you can’t say, ‘No, I’m not doing it for you, I’m only doing it for the others.’ So that’s how I ended up caring for the two children (on a full-time basis).

They took me literally - I retired Thursday. I had Friday, Saturday and Sunday in Foster and I came back on Monday and started babysitting. This year I have the children on four days of the week, and on Thursdays I get my mother as well and take her shopping. (Thelma)
Introduction
Like the stories of other grandparents in the study reported in this article, Thelma’s story provides an insight into the complexity of issues surrounding grandparents’ acceptance of a role as regular child care providers. This story is one of many collected as part of a larger study that sought to examine grandparents’ experiences of being regular child care providers. The grandparents in this study had their own children in the 1960s. Therefore, because of the parenting experiences they bring with them, it is important to first briefly consider the social context of parenting at that time and some of the significant changes that have occurred, particularly for women, during the intervening years. The stories of other grandparents (most of whom were grandmothers) will then be shared in order to highlight some of the issues raised by the grandparents and the nature of choice in making grandparenting decisions. The article concludes by considering the implications of these issues for service providers, grandparents, and policy-makers.

Changing images of grandparents and motherhood
The grandparents in the study were aged between 52 and 75 years and could be expected to have had their own children in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, many held images of grandparents as being nurturing - patient, supporting, and caring (Mackay, 1999; Smith & Drew, 2002; Wearing & Wearing, 1996). It was a time when less than 29 per cent of women in Australia were in the workforce and only 31 per cent of these were married. The expectation was that women would stay at home and support the family (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1998). This is very different from the situation today where 55 per cent of women are in employment (ABS, 2002). While more women were beginning to enter the workforce, there was still a view that workforce participation was only to be supported through necessity. Indeed, there was a sense of disapproval of mothers of young children entering the workforce and of mothers placing their children in extended hours care (Pocock, 2003; Wearing, 1984). At this time, there was limited availability of child care services that supported mothers (and sole parents) who were in employment. Indeed, it was not until the 1970s that we began to see a proliferation of long day care centres designed to provide child care for working parents (Brennan & O’Donnell, 1986).

The changing context of motherhood
Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s there were a number of significant developments that began to influence women’s growing independence and a changing concept of motherhood. Hakim (2000) has identified five key factors that have contributed to this phenomenon – the contraceptive revolution which resulted in women having greater control over their own fertility; the emergence of equal opportunity; the expansion of ‘white-collar’ occupations; the availability of jobs for those who saw work as secondary to other life interests; and an increasing importance of values and personal preference in lifestyle choice. These factors provide a context for changing attitudes and views on families’ full-time responsibility for the care of children. Further to this, recent data produced in a Fact Sheet by the Minister for Family and Community Services reveals that almost 30 per cent of sole mothers and more than half partnered mothers are in paid work when their youngest child is aged two (Vanstone, 2003). It is within this context of change that current grandparents are now engaged in the provision of child care on a regular basis.

Grandparents as informal child care providers
There have been significant social and demographic changes over recent years and these have had an impact on the fabric of communities. These changes include changing work patterns and changing family formations (Stanley, Sanson & McMichael, 2002). Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data indicates that women represent 72 per cent of part-time workers and just over 50 per cent of women in the labour force have children aged 0-4 years (ABS, 2002). Over 64 per cent of all 0-4 year-olds now use some form of child care, with 37 per cent of 0-4 year-olds using informal care in either a blended arrangement or as the sole type of care. Grandparents represent 69 per cent of informal care providers (ABS, 2003). The extensive use of
grandparents as informal child care providers supports a view that many parents are seeking flexible child care arrangement in order to manage their lifestyle choices (Pocock, 2003; Goodfellow, 1999).

**Grandparents in the 21st century**

Longevity, employment opportunity, and good health are all contributing to changing views of grandparents, and grandmothers in particular (Cotterill, 1992; Mackay, 1999; Wearing & Wearing, 1996; Wheelock & Jones, 2002). Indeed, some grandmothers hold quite prominent positions within Australian society. For example, Professor Marie Bashir AC holds the position of Governor of New South Wales and Quentin Bryce AO has recently been appointed Governor of Queensland. Grandparents are found in all social, economic, and cultural stratas of our society.

**Grandparents as identities**

Grandparents, like 'parents' and 'families', are not a homogeneous group. They are in their forties or octogenarians; can be employed full-time or retired; may be gregarious and have personal qualities indicative of loving relationships or be distant and lonesome (Wearing & Wearing, 1996). Grandparents may live alone or they may be encased within the family and co-reside with their children and grandchildren. Some grandparents may be independent and self-confident; others may lack initiative and self-esteem or be quite dependent. Grandparents fill diverse roles, one of which is the regular care of grandchildren. In providing such care, grandparents across cultural groups, while experiencing satisfaction in their role, also experience some common concerns, particularly in relation to their own social and physical wellbeing (Women's Health in the North (WHIN) and Victorian Co-operative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG), 2000).

Where ever-increasing numbers of children are being cared for outside the immediate family, the quality of child care during the early years has become a critical issue and is widely debated in the literature. Quality is most often aligned with concerns about the nature of adult: child relationships and the potential for the early years to provide protection against aberrant adolescent behaviours (Pathways to Prevention, 1999). However, while issues surrounding the quality of child care provision have been extensively debated, little attention has been given to quality within informal child care arrangements and particularly the nature of grandparent/grandchild relationships (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002).

One perspective on the role of grandparents is that they have a significant responsibility to pass on values and skills from one generation to the next. From a psychosocial perspective, this view has been strongly promoted by Erik Erikson (1963) through his psychological stage theory of lifespan development. Erikson identified the seventh of his eight stages of human development as one of 'generativity'. McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) explain the positive view of generativity as a situation where 'the adult nurtures, teaches, leads and promotes the next generation while generating life products and outcomes that benefit the social system and promote its continuity from one generation to the next' (p.1003).

Generativity is multifaceted and must be viewed from both an individual and a multidimensional perspective of demand, desire, concern, belief, commitment, action and narration within the context of a person's life (McAdams, de St Aubin & Logan, 1993). Generativity is not a discrete stage or played out in isolation. It is influenced by social/cultural expectation and an inner desire to feel needed as well as a concern for the next generation. With respect to grandparents, generativity becomes evident in the nature of grandparents' relationships with their adult children and grandchildren.

**The study**

The study presented here sought to investigate grandparents' identities and their role as regular child care providers. Information was gained from 15 grandparents (including two couples) who attended playgroups —either a specific playgroup for grandparents and their grandchildren or a regular playgroup for parents and children. These grandparents were from English-speaking backgrounds and self-nominated to participate in the study. A narrative inquiry approach was used to gather stories of the grandparents’ experiences as regular child care providers.
providers. These stories were collected over a number of weeks during the playgroup sessions. Some follow-up intensive 1:1 interviews were conducted. The data was analysed for emerging themes and some of these themes were shared with the individual grandparents for further exploration. It is the abstractions from these stories that are reported here in italics throughout this article.

The grandparents came together to provide opportunities for their grandchildren to engage in other activities and be with other children. However, the grandparents also enjoyed being together and sharing their experiences. The grandparents’ ages ranged from 52 years to the mid 70s. They cared for their daughters’ and/or sons’ children on a regular basis for at least five hours per week. Some grandparents cared for their grandchild(ren) in their own home; others went to the child’s home. Indeed, one grandparent traveled by public transport to be at her grandchild’s home from 5.45am to 6.30/8.00pm three days a week. This grandparent was still in the workforce and employed on a part-time basis.

Procedure
The grandparent playgroup met each week for two hours. As researcher, the author attended this playgroup on many occasions and sought opportunities to engage in discussion with each of the grandparents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the playgroup session and with two grandparents in their own home. A focus group discussion was also conducted with two couple grandparents who jointly shared their grandparenting role.

The guiding questions for the interviews and for the focus group discussion were:

- What are the reasons for choosing to care for grandchildren?
- To what extent were the care arrangements negotiated?
- How do you view yourself in this role?
- What is it really like, being a grandparent and having this responsibility?
- What do you think is important about the care of young children?
- What have you experienced that confirms or challenges your initial expectations/views?

All 1:1 interviews and the focus group discussion were transcribed. A qualitative analysis was undertaken of all the transcriptions and general themes were drawn from this material for further analysis. The researcher’s interpretations of the themes emerging from the grandparents’ stories were shared with the grandparents for verification.

Choosing to care for grandchildren
The circumstances under which grandparents chose to care for their grandchildren on a regular basis were initially centred on the grandparents’ commitment to provide ‘in kind’ support to their own children. They wished to enable their children to become financially independent. They wanted their children to have good jobs and to be able to purchase a family home—evidence of this can be seen in the story that introduced this article. Grandparents were supportive of their adult children establishing themselves as fully functioning members of society, having a work ethic, and having children. In essence, grandparents wished for their adult children those things that they, as grandparents, valued. Their comments also endorsed Cotterill’s (1992) findings of a strong sense of obligation, altruism, and reciprocity within their parent/adult-child relationship:

Grandparents further expressed what may loosely be described as ‘intergenerational altruism’ through their attitudes towards providing care for their grandchildren whether planned:

It was sort of an understanding to start with. If we have a child you will look after it, won’t you? We said, ‘Oh yes’. We’d rather have him than for him to go to strangers.

Or unplanned:

My daughter fell pregnant. We discussed this and I said that I would look after him.

Clearly these grandparents were making choices about their grandparenting role. However, as revealed in Thelma’s story (at the beginning of this article) other factors within family relationships also impacted on the extent to which grandparents were able to have full ownership of that choice. In essence, there was a tension between economic and social values and
personal choice options within relationships (Hakim, 2000; Keary, 2000).

**Interpretative accounts of grandparents’ stories**

Understandings about grandparents’ roles as regular carers of their grandchildren may be placed within family systems theory, psychoanalytic and attachment theory (Smith & Drew, 2002) as well as lifespan development (Erikson, 1963). Smith & Drew (2002), in their extensive review of research on grandparenting, identified the need for studies to move beyond description of the nature of contact between grandparents and their grandchildren (and the circumstances that support that contact) to developing a wider conceptual framework that supports the heterogeneity of grandparents and their relationships. Since not all grandparent/grandchild situations are conducive to positive caring, nor do all grandparents wish to have the responsibility of caring for their young grandchildren on a regular basis, any overarching framework needs to be able to readily accommodate both diversity and choice. The following key themes, drawn from the qualitative analysis of the grandparents’ stories, provide a context within which a framework of heterogeneity and relationships may be considered.

**Caring and relationships**

Caring is about relationships. Many grandparents spoke of the self-fulfilling nature of caring and how they felt rewarded through observing their grandchild’s growth and development, the child’s inquisitiveness, and the child’s emotional, social and intellectual responsiveness. These elements of attunement (Perry, undated), relatedness and reciprocity form part of a caring relationship (Noddings, 1984). Such a relationship promulgated the exchange of warmth, love, and mutual understanding within ongoing exchanges between grandparent and grandchild. It was a relationship that grandparents described as being involved and fulfilling and embraced an emotional and reciprocal dialogue (Volling, McElwain, Notara & Herrera, 2002, p.447).

Grandparents were quite specific about their caring role being different from that of just minding or babysitting. Subtly, grandparents spoke about caring within the context of their knowing not only about their grandchild but the family. This knowing enabled the grandparents to be aware and participate with them (their grandchildren). They saw themselves as providing stability, continuity of care, routine and consistency. They contrasted their role with that of staff in child care:

*If you are caring for children in general, you are not emotionally involved. With strangers he’s just another fee. With us he is family.*

This contrast in roles reflects grandparents’ emotional investment and willingness to be emotionally available to their young grandchildren (Volling, McElwain, Notaro & Herrera, 2002). It reflects the nature of attachment. Similar observations were made in a large National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) study undertaken in the USA where it was shown that grandparents displayed more ‘positive caregiving’ than did unrelated providers of child care in homes and centres (NICHD, 1996, p.299). Grandparents not only had a personal commitment, indicative of intergenerational relationships, but an intuitive sense of the importance of the early years for lifelong development. Such relationships are accompanied by trust and the moral dimensions of obligation and responsibility.

**Trust and responsibility**

Grandparents’ caring and generational responsibility not only comes with obligation and commitment but also with a strong sense of trust and, with this, the fear of being perceived by their own adult child to be incompetent:

*My daughter says, ‘I trust you to look after her’. I sometimes have a sense of guilt— the fact that she is in my care.*

*I worry that I may not look after her properly. It is up to me to make her day pleasant.*

This sense of trust, relationship, and commitment was often not dissimilar to responsibility associated with a parenting role:

*I had to toilet train the two of them (two grandchildren from different families)... I found that exceedingly hard*
as I was trying to do it in conjunction with the two mums and I didn’t really know how they were handling it.

Here the grandparent was not only faced with the difficulty of being responsible for toilet training but meeting the expectations of two families where her daughters-in-law may well have had quite different approaches and expectations.

The following comment conveys a sense of tension within that responsibility:

I have so much to do with the two grandchildren...
I find it difficult having a real hell of a lot of responsibility when they're not my children...

Responsibility reflected an emotional challenge and, while some grandparents devoted the whole of (their) life to their grandchildren, others spoke about the need to be intellectually challenged in their lives.

The need for intellectual challenge
The relationship between grandparents and grandchildren was often one where whatever they’re doing; I’m always there with them. However, the expectation and extent of being there often meant that grandparents felt a sense of boredom because of perceived lack of intellectual challenge in being child care providers:

I get bored sitting and playing with her (the grandchild) and doing things like drawing or playing with play dough.

One grandparent clearly articulated the nature of this boredom:

It's taken over my whole life and while it's fulfilling and I enjoy it... I do miss interaction with people... it's not occupying my mind... it's not challenging enough.

While many of the grandparents’ stories revealed a mix of emotional engagement and self-fulfillment, several grandparents expressed the need to have opportunities to explore their own interests and to continue to be involved in other activities. The circumstances surrounding grandparents’ sense of obligation and responsibility varied. Therefore, each made their own choices in balancing their grandparenting role. Some grandparents sought to be involved in hobbies outside their grandparenting time, others were still in employment, and others devoted all of their time to their grandchildren.

Contradictions within caring arrangements
Contradictions in the nature of grandparenting and the impact that it had on grandparent’s lives and sense of familial responsibility were evident in a number of the grandparents’ stories.

Initially I had expectations that I would look after my grandchild for five days of the week and that he would go home at night (and that I would have weekends free). Now the family is living with me, I have not been able to go down the coast and enjoy our holiday house. I don’t think that I have seen the news on TV for 12 months. If this does not change then it will run me down... sometimes our own children have little respect for what grandparents do—that’s how life is.

The contradictions found within many grandparents’ stories reveal the tension between altruism (joy and pleasure) and exploitation (sense of being unrecognised and undervalued); freedom to pursue one’s own interests and familial obligation; intergenerational responsibilities and retirement choices; and balancing their own work and grandchild care responsibilities.

Many grandparents readily identified the things they ‘gave up’ in order to meet their grandparenting commitments:

We used to have a caravan and go away for about nine months of the year traveling. Now the caravan’s gone, the car’s gone and we’ve changed our life completely to look after our grandchild... Sometimes I regret that, sometimes I still wouldn’t go back to it.

For many grandparents in this study, visions of retirement had not included the responsibility of caring for their grandchild on a regular basis. Even if this were so, they had not fully appreciated the implications of undertaking the role.
Availability and imposition
Most grandparents willingly undertook responsibilities associated with caring for their young grandchildren. However, they were less willing to accept impositions outside the boundaries of the arrangements they had made or the nature of the caring role. This concern was expressed by the notion of feeling put upon:

…my daughter has been invited to a wedding. We talked about me looking after Andrew (the grandchild) and then I received an invitation to the wedding. My daughter then said, ‘Well, what am I going to do?’ There was an assumption about my availability – as if it was my problem to solve.

The feeling grandparents had about being taken for granted most often occurred when their adult children made assumptions about the grandparents being available while the adult children went out socially or attended to their own personal needs. Grandparents expected that their adult children would respect their needs; collect the grandchildren at previously arranged times; not use grandparents for their own personal gain; and not assume that grandparents would always be available. Grandparents regarded it as an imposition when their adult children arrived one or two hours later than expected to collect their child.

Many grandparents revealed through their stories a dichotomy of caring for their grandchild and having given up their own expectations of the lifestyle they had planned to enjoy:

I sometimes feel tied down. It’s really hard to look after your grandchild, particularly when the child’s parents want to go out or I have something I want to do. I sometimes feel taken for granted.

While being taken for granted was less likely to be acceptable than the emotional and physical exhaustion some grandparents experienced, many grandparents accepted this as a burden associated with their caring role. Where care arrangements had not been openly discussed, then grandparents were less likely to directly address these issues with their adult children. However, where grandparents did set limits to their availability to care and made that known to their adult children, then the grandparents themselves were more likely to be satisfied with the arrangements. In particular, grandparents did not feel guilty about time for me—a time to be self indulgent, whether that was resting on the couch to recuperate from a busy day with the grandchild or to pursue an interest. That is, the degree of satisfaction with the grandparenting role appears to be related not only to who managed the choices available to the grandparent but also to the extent to which those choices had been negotiated between the grandparents and their adult children.

Many grandparents expressed a deep sense of commitment to the care of their young grandchildren. That commitment embraced a strong sense of both altruism and empathy.

Altruism may be viewed as having an unselfish regard for the welfare of others. It also involves a degree of giving over of the self within a caring relationship or self-sacrifice (Wispe, 1978, pp.304/305). Difficulties arose where choice was limited by assumptions about altruism. While there is a sense of altruism, obligation and responsibility in family relationships, it is quite evident that ‘the use’ of grandparents to fill a variety of roles should not be taken for granted.

Balance in caring relationships
Being part of the family meant, for some grandparents, that they committed themselves to intergenerational care. However, several grandparents reported the need to place limits on the balance between their caring relationships and a ‘parenting’ role:

My friend had trouble with her young grandchild. He would not want to go home because he had been with her twelve hours or more a day.

Little is known about attachment relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren; however, there is evidence in the grandparents’ stories that the strength of the relationship that develops between many grandparents and their grandchildren supports the development of strong attachments. While it is possible for young children to become attached to more than one adult, grandparents were often concerned about the nature of that attachment:

Every child is different but I don’t want him to look at me and say that I am his mother. That is not right.
Some grandparents had a sense of the strong bonds they developed with their grandchildren through the opportunity they had to devote themselves to their care, however, they did not wish to accept full responsibility for a parenting role. Just because they may have had more time to parent the second time around they did not wish to usurp parents’ responsibilities:

*I used to have my grandson for breakfast, give him his meals, and at night bath him and have him ready for bed. So what does his mother do?*

In balancing their responsibilities to their adult children, many grandparents were also conscious of the need to retain a sense of self-identity.

**Satisfaction and choice**

What has become evident throughout this study is that the degree of satisfaction grandparents experienced in their role is related to what may well be described as a theory of choice and who manages that choice. Hakim (2000), when considering women’s work-lifestyle choices, proposed that women were now in a position to make a genuine lifestyle choice between work and family. While this position is much more difficult for some, she argued that the choice was not only available but that women’s preferences and priorities in relation to work-lifestyle could be grouped within three broad categories: home-centred, adaptive, and work-centred women. Women, she argued, made choices both within and across these broad categories.

We tend to make those choices that are the most satisfying for us (Glasser, 1998). That is, we choose to do those things that enable us to most effectively manage the world around us or the situation we are in at the time. Glasser (1998) considers that every human being has five basic needs: the need for belonging or being connected in a relationship with others; the need to have some type of control over our lives; the need to have the freedom to pursue what interests us; the need for enjoyment; and the desire to satisfy those physiological needs necessary for our survival. Grandparents’ dissatisfaction with their role arose where they felt insignificant or powerless in having to deal with a situation they became caught up in and had difficulty resolving because of their concern about damaging the relationship they had with their adult children.

The grandparents’ attempts to satisfy the basic needs identified by Glasser (1998) prompted them to make different and yet very individual choices about their grandparenting role. Where they felt a sense of conflict between what they perceived their life would be like and the reality of their grandparenting circumstances then their decision was most often to satisfy a particular ‘priority’ need. For some grandparents, choosing to satisfying that need (such as the need to belong or feel valued) may well take precedence over other needs and may even have been detrimental to their feeling of personal autonomy and wellbeing. That is, in economic terms, the decision by individual grandparents to provide regular child care may have ‘opportunity costs’ associated with it (Wheelock & Jones, 2002). Choice and opportunity costs are important considerations in any debate about the provision of informal child care, particularly where grandparents are significant providers of complementary child care.

The central tenet of a proposed theory of choice in relation to grandparenting is that the degree of grandparent’s satisfaction with their role as regular providers of child care is directly related to the nature of their choices. While choice may be about human agency and freedom, it is also personal and shaped by the situation grandparents find themselves in (Christensen & Gray, 2002; Sagoff, 2003). Choice may be selective (I will on do it at this time and in this place); negotiated (can we come to some arrangement?); enforced (due to circumstances beyond the grandparents’ control such as where courts assign the care of grandchildren to grandparents) or life choice (Why would I do that? I do not think that it is my responsibility. I have reared my children.). Further, some grandparents may not choose or elect to exercise their preferred choice options. However, consideration of these and other issues raised in this study have the potential to form the basis of a conceptual framework that displays an appreciation of the heterogeneity of grandparents and their familial relationships.
Reflections and implications for grandparents as child care providers

Changing social values, familial roles and expectations provide a context in which many grandparents are being challenged with greater responsibility for their grandchildren than they may have anticipated (Mackay, 1999; Millward 1998). These responsibilities come with changing demands on the role of grandparents who may have held different images of their lifestyle as 'seniors' from the situations in which they may now find themselves. Indeed, Bengtson (2001) strongly argues that increasing diversity of families and patterns of family arrangements, as well as the social context within which families live and the weakening of family bonds, may contribute to an even greater role for grandparents in the future. He envisages grandparents as being the one stable element that children may experience within a mix of family relationships. Under these circumstances, grandparents may play a pivotal role in relations across two or more generations. Changing contexts and circumstances, along with recognition of a choice factor, gives rise to new considerations about grandparents, both within family relationships and a broader socially-oriented community network of human service provision.

Implications for services providers

The grandparents in this study valued the nature of the relationships they had with their grandchildren. Many grandparents were the sole providers of child care, particularly for children under three years of age. Other grandparents supplemented other more formal child care arrangements. Whatever the circumstance, it was clear from the grandparents’ stories that they valued the nature of the relationship they had with their grandchild(ren). There are three key points here. First, child care providers (other than grandparents) need to recognize that grandparents have a significant role to play within the family and, therefore, should be included in any type of parent involvement. Second, when discussing the concept of 'families' with children, due recognition needs to be given to the role that grandparents may play in children’s lives. Third, the nature of care relationships and the importance of early adult/child relationships are such that child care providers need to reflect on ways they can more effectively engage in reciprocal relationships with the children in their care. Further to this, child care providers need to recognize that children may experience a 'patchwork' (Goodfellow, 1999) or 'jigsaw' (Wheelock & Jones, 2002) of child care arrangements. Therefore, it is critical that attention be given to supporting children as they manage the potentially different expectations of each care environment.

Implications for grandparents

Further work needs to be undertaken around the issue of grandparents providing both complementary and supplementary child care. However, from the insights gained in this study there appears to be sufficient evidence to suggest that grandparents gain the greatest satisfaction when their role has been openly discussed and clearly negotiated with their adult children. Grandparents are potentially a community resource that can benefit both adults and children; however, that resource should not be exploited to the detriment of grandparents’ emotional and physical wellbeing. This study has highlighted the contribution that grandparents not only make to the provision of child care and the emotional and social development of very young children but also to the livelihood of their adult children.

Implications for policy-makers

Many issues arose in this study and, indeed, are supported by a study undertaken by Wheelock and Jones (2002) in the north-east of England. Several of these issues have implications for those responsible for the development of social policy across work/family practices and child care provision. Parents most often seek child care to support them in employment. For the large percentage of women in part-time and casual work, affordability and flexibility in child care arrangements is the key; with flexibility comes a sense of having to feel confident about the choice of arrangements. There are also issues around care for children younger than three years. Parents particularly seek child care environments that are nurturing, provide consistency and continuity of care, and are readily accommodating of their child. Many grandparents perceive that they are more able to
provide that care on a regular basis than are more formal child care services. With this in mind, the carers’ capacity to engage in reciprocal relationships with very young children (something highly valued by grandparents) may be limited by structural variables such as adult:child ratios, group sizes, and the carers’ lack of adequate training for the role. Alternately, if grandparents are to be encouraged and recognized for the role they play in providing regular child care, then consideration of the possibility of paying grandparents a small allowance, such as that currently being discussed in the United Kingdom, may be warranted (Mooney, Stratham & Simon, 2002).

Parents want to have a trusting relationship with their child’s carer. They want to feel that the carer is reliable, has similar values, and will love and bond with their child (Goodfellow, 1999). However, there is an even greater issue at stake here with respect to the taken-for-grantedness associated with grandparents as regular child care providers. This means that child care decisions, as with women’s work decisions, need to be able to be made according to individual circumstances, commitments, beliefs and values. If governments wish to increase the labour force through a greater participation of women then a ‘one size fits all’ policy does not appear to be appropriate. Some grandparents may wish to provide care for grandchildren but others do not. There is a need to turn to more formal care arrangements, particularly for children under three years of age, and consider the extent to which the needs of children and families are actually being met.

The availability of grandparents is another issue. Families are having their children later and, therefore, grandparents may not be as physically able to care for young children. Grandparents may be remaining in employment themselves and/or be caring for older parents so it cannot be assumed that this resource is going to continue to be readily available within the community. Grandparents make a significant financial/social contribution to society by enabling parents with young children to remain in the labour force. However, the extent of that contribution often remains unrecognized, undervalued, and under-resourced.

Indeed, Hakim (2003) argues that ‘governments find it difficult to accord reproductive work the same status and dignity and value as productive work’ (p.12). If this is true and initiatives such as maternity leave really benefit only a small percent of ‘work-centred’ women, then the need for child care providers will not dissipate nor will the need to further support those grandparents who choose to care for their grandchildren on a regular basis.

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Dr Goodfellow has also written on this topic in the latest edition of ECA’s ‘Every Child’ magazine.
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The tooth fairy comes, or is it just your Mum and Dad?: A child’s construction of knowledge

Joy Cullen
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Sociocultural theory promotes a view of children as capable and competent learners who construct their knowledge through participation in authentic, meaningful social experiences. This article describes one child’s search for understanding about the ‘tooth fairy’, sea creatures, and principles of physics. The child’s inquiries demonstrate that prior knowledge contributes to individual learning, motivation and collaborative meaning-making that lead to expanded knowledge. The child’s knowledge construction is situated in the contexts of both active individual inquiry and co-constructed in pedagogical relationships. The contribution of subject knowledge to meaningful learning is raised. Consistent with sociocultural theory, the article highlights the central roles of dialogic inquiry and reciprocal and responsive relationships in community of learners and community of inquirers models of knowledge construction.

Children’s construction of knowledge

Cognitive-constructivist theories promote the view that knowledge construction is an active and individual undertaking. Piaget’s theories acknowledge the role of social experience, but describe learning as resulting primarily from children’s personal exploration of their environment. The impact of children’s social interactions on their cognitive development has been emphasised in social-constructivist theories. Sociocultural theory proposes that knowledge is socially-constructed, or co-constructed, with human beings motivated to actively construct and reconstruct knowledge in relationships and interactions with others (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Rogoff, 1998). Children are viewed as capable and competent learners. Children’s prior knowledge and expertise is considered a valid and worthwhile contribution to the meaning-making process. With children’s learning and development defined as a ‘process of socialisation into the existing system of meanings in a culture, the goal for research becomes one of understanding how children attain those meanings’ (Göncü, 1999, p. 12).

A study on beliefs and practices in relation to subject knowledge (Hedges, 2002), supports the belief that children’s cognitive development and learning is situated in the context of authentic, meaningful experiences. The case study kindergarten is a sessional early childhood service in Auckland, New Zealand. The researcher spent seven weeks attending morning sessions for four-year-old children. The study used several data-gathering techniques during this period. This paper draws on group interviews with children and parents, a parent’s diary of her child’s inquiries, and researcher field notes recording participant observation of learning and teaching interactions that children engaged in with teachers and the researcher, including an excursion undertaken during the period of the study.

This article describes one child’s search for meaning, knowledge, and understanding over a period of five weeks. Children chose their own pseudonyms as one aspect of being actively involved in the research process. Penguin 2 was aged four years and 11 months. Examples are provided of her revisiting prior knowledge and experiences as she built her knowledge of the ‘tooth
fairy’ and sea creatures. Further, the importance of purposeful learning and meaningful knowledge construction is demonstrated through her inquiries into principles of physics. Findings establish that knowledge construction involves children in both active individual inquiry and collaborative social interactions in pedagogical relationships, and reflects knowledge that is culturally-valued, such as subject knowledge.

Subject knowledge relates to conceptual knowledge of subject domains, such as science, mathematics, literature, music. Recent research on children’s prior knowledge supports the notion of children moving from novice to expert in different subject areas (Wellman & Gelman, 1998). Describing prior knowledge as foundational to new learning, Wellman and Gelman’s review of research emphasises the importance of constructing new knowledge based on existing knowledge. Experienced or expert learners bring applicable and effective knowledge to new learning situations.

The ‘tooth fairy’—a search for meaning
The kindergarten had a table of resources for scientific inquiry, including a cow’s jaw. One tooth had disengaged from the jaw. Penguin 2 noticed this and asked her teacher, Kate, if she thought the ‘tooth fairy’ might come. Kate told her she was unsure whether or not cows had ‘tooth fairies’. Penguin 2 left the tooth out for the ‘tooth fairy’, checked the area the next morning, but did not comment that the tooth remained where she had left it.

A week later, Penguin 2 was sitting alone in the sandpit letting sand run through her fingers into a bowl. She initiated the following exchange with the researcher.

**Penguin 2** - It’s fairy sand, it does magic. It belongs to the fairies, they make it into magic for tooth fairy land.

**Helen** - Has the tooth fairy visited you?

**Penguin 2** - No, you have to have a fallen-out tooth for that to happen.

**Helen** - When does this happen?

**Penguin 2** - When you are six. My friend has wiggly teeth now because she got hers earlier than me. The tooth fairy has lots of teeth in fairyland.

**But she won’t give me one because they are old teeth.**

**Helen** - What happens when your tooth falls out?

**Penguin 2** - The tooth fairy comes, or is it just your Mum and Dad?

**Helen** - I’m not sure. How do you get another tooth?

**Penguin 2** - It just grows back, but it is bigger.

Penguin 2’s prior conversation with an older child and her consequent knowledge and thinking were evident as she attempted to understand cultural explanations for a biological process.

Penguin 2 raised her inquiries with Kate again the following week as she traced the cow’s tooth onto a piece of paper. She suggested that perhaps the ‘tooth fairy’ would come if she took the tooth home. Kate said she thought the ‘tooth fairy’ might come to the kindergarten if they left a note with the tooth. Consequently, Penguin 2 wanted to write a note, and asked Kate to help her.

**Kate** - What words do we need to write?

**Penguin 2** - To the tooth fairy.

Penguin 2 then told Kate she was writing *too big—the words need to be smaller for the tooth fairy to be able to read it*. She got Kate a narrower pencil to *write smaller* with, inside a heart shape. Another child, Starfish, then asked for a note for the ‘tooth fairy’ too. Kate attended to this as Penguin 2 thoughtfully contemplated her own note while holding the tooth. When the notes were complete, they were left on a table at Penguin 2’s suggestion. The next morning, Penguin 2 saw that the notes and the tooth remained where they had been left and deduced that this meant ‘cows do not have tooth fairies like people do and they probably don’t get new teeth’.

Penguin 2 had revisited her knowledge and thinking about the ‘tooth fairy’ with adults and peers as she sought to make sense of her experiences. Revisiting knowledge, and metacognitive skills such as memory and recall that are crucial to such revisiting, were evident, and essential to her ongoing knowledge-building processes. With regard to the social relationships facilitating learning, both the teacher and the researcher were unsure how best to respond to
queries about the ‘tooth fairy’. Kate informed Penguin 2’s mother of her child’s inquiries, to enable her to follow this up as she deemed appropriate. While Penguin 2’s search for meaning appeared satisfied in relation to the cow’s tooth, she was likely to continue with her inquiries as she strived to make sense of the biological process of human tooth loss and regrowth, and the cultural explanation of the ‘tooth fairy’.

**Sea creatures—a search for knowledge**

From a sociocultural perspective of curriculum, an excursion is a social and cultural event through which children’s learning is promoted by providing first-hand experience of people, places, and things in the community. The kindergarten undertook an excursion to Kelly Tarlton’s Antarctic Encounter and Underwater World during the research period. This is a tourist venue with two main attractions: an area where penguins are viewed in a simulated natural habitat, and an aquarium with a viewing tunnel.

Prior to the excursion, Penguin 2 and Orca, who had both previously been to the venue, debated whether they would see King or Emperor penguins. Penguin 2 brought postcards to kindergarten to provide evidence for her understanding.

_Helen - Penguin 2’s brought along two postcards that she got from Kelly Tarlton’s last time… Where does it tell us what kind of penguins they are?_

(Penguin 2 points to the back of the postcard)

_Helen - On the back. And what does it say?_

_Penguin 2 - King Penguins (pointing to the words)._

Penguin 2’s mother, Lucy, noted in the parents’ post-excitation interview and her diary that Penguin 2 felt vindicated about the penguin classification argument.

_Lucy - Penguin 2 was in the debate of the penguins. What kind they were, that was very important._

Penguin 2 was emphatic in her response after the excursion, demonstrating that constructing accurate knowledge was indeed important to her.

_Helen - So were they King or Emperor?_

_Penguin 2 - King Penguins!_

The children’s interviews prior to the excursion, field notes, and Lucy’s diary revealed that Penguin 2 also had many content-related questions she wanted answered through the excursion experience. Penguin 2 and Penguin 1 revealed their learning and collaborative understandings in their post-excursion interview.

_Helen - And did you find out how penguins breathe under water?_

_Penguin 2 - Um, they come up for a little breath._

_Helen - … How do fish breathe?_

_Penguin 2 - Through their gills._

_Penguin 1 - Under the water._

_Helen - How long can penguins stay under water?_

_Penguin 2 - A very long time._

_Helen - … I think it was about 20 minutes wasn’t it?… Do you think we could hold our breath for 20 minutes?_

_Penguin 2 - No … I just go under for five … then I come up and take a breath._

_Helen - I don’t know if you could even stay under for five!_

_Penguin 2 - I can! My swimming lesson teacher counts to five._

This exchange demonstrates further that children interpret new knowledge and understanding through the lens of prior knowledge and experience. This understanding of a child’s conception of time could enable teachers to plan ways to help children’s cognition become more accurate. Establishing the difference between seconds and minutes would assist Penguin 2’s understanding of the greatly differing length of time she could hold her breath in comparison with a penguin.

_Helen - The other question you had was you wanted to know if the penguins were as big as you._

_Penguin 2 - No, ’cos the King penguins are a bit bigger than me._
Helen - Do you think one day you might be as big as the penguins?

Penguin 2 - No way!

Penguin 1 - Oh yes she will when she’s an adult.

In this example, Penguin 2’s peer has challenged her thinking and understanding. Given Penguin 2’s active search for knowledge, she was likely to revisit this understanding in the future.

Penguin 2’s initial focus before the excursion was on penguins. The excursion experience led to rapid expansion in Penguin 2’s interests and inquiries. She began exploring further conceptual knowledge. Lucy revealed in the parents’ interview that she had found it difficult to answer some of her daughter’s questions that arose from the excursion.

Lucy - She wanted to know what kryll look like, and what happens when ice melts.

Helen - And how did you explain those things?

Lucy - Well, she came up with it, that kryll were like insects in the water . . . . (How) ice melts was a bit hard . . . . I thought it was a bit hard to explain. Um, why is it called a nurse shark? . . . And why did the leopard seals eat the penguins? . . . But we had the book to follow up so that was good.

This exchange suggested that both Penguin 2’s self-inquiry (‘she came up with it’) and relationship with her mother (‘we had the book to follow up’) assisted her new learning and thinking.

Principles of physics—a search for understanding

The teachers’ focus in many of their teaching interactions in the kindergarten, consistent with their curriculum planning, was on developing cognitive skills of thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving. During a planned small group teaching episode, Kate had a large concrete brick, and posed the problem of ‘How do we get the brick on to the table?’ The children theorised and tried out several strategies involving lifting, a ramp and pulleys. Penguin 2 then asked, ‘Why do we need the brick on the table?’

Kate later reflected that this question was a good reminder that for children learning has to be relevant and that problem-solving needs to be purposeful and meaningful.

On another occasion, Penguin 2 initiated investigation of the physics of centrifugal force and displacement in a vortex tube.

Penguin 2 was holding the vortex tube and told some other children, ‘The air comes up there through the bubbles.’ Kate asked, ‘How does it (air) get from here to here?’ Penguin 2 replied, ‘Maybe it floats up.’ Kate pointed out small air bubbles. Penguin 2 suggested they need a magnifying glass, got it, and put it up to the bottle. She asked, ‘How does it get up here?’ We need to take this (the connecting piece between bottles) off and catch one.’ Kate: ‘Do you think these air bubbles are carrying the air through from the other bottle?’

Penguin 2: ‘I don’t know.’ Kate took the connector off and Penguin 2 heard the air escaping. Then Kate squeezed the bottle to see if Penguin 2 could feel the air. She could. Kate suggested they get ‘Squiddy the cartesian diver’ (a scientific resource) to demonstrate. She got the instructions out and read them with the children. ‘How can you tell if there is air in something?’ ‘You put the diver in the water. If he floats, we know there’s air in him.’ Penguin 2: ‘He does float!’ Kate then had Penguin 2 squeeze Squidy so he was full of water. He sank. Penguin 2 hypothesised that he sank because he was full of water, but he floated when he was full of air, so maybe air comes up above water. The interaction concluded at this point.

In this example, Penguin 2 did not have her self-discovery of a principle of physics confirmed or explained. She may continue revisiting this learning until understanding occurs.

The significance of subject knowledge

Penguin 2’s knowledge and inquiries demonstrate that teachers need a sound subject knowledge base, in this case of the language and principles of science, in order to effectively extend and co-construct knowledge with children. For example, it would have been compatible with the focus on cognitive skills for Kate to incorporate knowledge of physics during the vortex
tube interaction. This example, and Lucy’s experience of responding to her daughter’s burgeoning inquiries with regard to sea creatures, support the contention that adults’ conceptual understanding is crucial to having the ability to accurately explain ideas to children and stimulate further inquiry from them, taking into account children’s prior knowledge and abilities. In the context of early science education, Inagaki (1992) recommends that teachers acknowledge young children’s early domain-specific interests and knowledge as a basis for supporting their deep involvement in learning.

Consistent with a sociocultural perspective, inquiry learning and constructing knowledge are processes of meaning-making or negotiating meaning through intelligent and informed interactions. Penguin 2 revealed her active individual inquiry into knowledge construction about the ‘tooth fairy’, sea creatures, and principles of physics. Penguin 2’s cognitive development and inquiry learning were self-motivated, assisted through participation in social experiences with others, and extended her current thinking and knowledge. Penguin 2’s search for knowledge and understanding therefore occurred during her own meaningful thinking and inquiry processes and were also co-constructed in pedagogical relationships with her teachers, mother, peers, and the researcher. Penguin 2 also demonstrated that to think, theorise, and problem-solve, she needed to have something of interest and relevance to theorise about, and that adults’ deep conceptual understanding could contribute to her knowledge building. In short, cognitive learning processes required subject knowledge to make the learning meaningful, understood, and remembered.

Inquiry learning and participation in a learning community

Te Whariki, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 1996), recommends that curriculum be based on children’s interests. As Penguin 2 demonstrated, interests emerge from children’s participation in authentic social and cultural experiences that relate meaningfully to their prior knowledge and experiences. Children’s prior knowledge and pedagogical relationships between adults and children can promote further inquiry and lead to construction of new subject knowledge. Furthermore, as Cullen (1999) noted, teachers need confidence in subject knowledge relating to children’s interests.

Children gain opportunities for constructing knowledge during learning experiences in early childhood settings such as kindergartens. A focus on co-constructing knowledge within sociocultural theory has led to models such as ‘community of learners’ (Rogoff, Matusov & White, 1996) and ‘community of inquirers’ (Wells, 2001a). Rogoff et al.’s (1996) term emphasises that learning is a collaborative participation in shared experiences. It highlights the mutual understanding required for meaningful learning and teaching. Wells (2001b) claims that dialogue is ‘the discourse of knowledge building’ (p. 185) and that during inquiry, dialogue takes on a crucial mediating role. Hedges (2002) suggests that dialogue is likely to be four-year-old children’s principal learning mechanism, as they are not yet able to access written material in cultural tools such as books, postcards, and the Internet without the mediating influence of adults’ or more skilled peers’ interpretation. Both children’s use of dialogue with others during socially-constructed learning and within self-dialogue as ‘private speech’ during individual inquiry was evident.

Further, the communities of learners and inquirers models acknowledge the sociocultural origins of knowledge and allow for the flexible and changing agency of participants within the learning and teaching processes. These models are therefore suggested as being consistent with the view of children as capable and competent, and stress both the central role of dialogic inquiry and the significance of the reciprocal and responsive relationships highlighted in early childhood pedagogy. The case study of Penguin 2 presented here provides evidence for such views and suggests application of learning community approaches in early childhood education settings as a way to maximise meaningful knowledge construction for children.
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References


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SUPS workers’ perspective of child care quality

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Quality child-rearing environments play a significant role in shaping positive long-term outcomes for children. In Australia, quality in child care is controlled both by state legislation and national accreditation. However, recent concerns expressed by a wide range of professionals and interested parties have led to the development of several projects by the author, each investigating concerns about child care quality. This report focuses on the perspectives of Supplementary Service (SUPS) workers, whose roles require them to visit and share experiences of children in various child care settings. SUPS workers in this study talked about their definitions of quality care, and shared stories about their experiences of what they perceive to be high and low quality child care.

Introduction

The important contribution made by the child-rearing environment to long-term outcomes for children is now well recognised (McCain & Mustard, 1999). This has led to a revitalisation of interest in the development of quality environments for children. While many researchers are focusing on supporting the maintenance of quality home environments (Sims, 2002), it is also important to examine other environments in which young children spend a significant proportion of their time. One of these is child care.

In Australia, child care services target families whose parents participate in the workforce or who are studying, families who need respite (for either parents or children), families identified as at risk, and families whose parents are participating in their community (Press & Hayes, 2001). In 1999, 344,900 children in Australia used community based child care centres, private child care centers, or family day care schemes. Of these, 18.6 per cent are children under the age of two years, 15 per cent of children come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and two per cent are from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background (Press & Hayes, 2001). Approximately two-thirds of all Australian children under school age are, at some time, involved in some form of alternative care away from their parents (Wannan, 2000).

Quality in child care is influenced by many factors; some are captured in the various state regulations and others are presented in the national accreditation system for Long Day Care (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2001). (Note that an accreditation system is now also available for Family Day Care.) The long day care accreditation system is based on assumptions that quality services:

- have clear vision (presented in the philosophy and goals) guiding staff in their practice;
- respect and develop each child as an individual – including children who are perceived as different;
- offer developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for each child;
- value relationships between staff and children, and staff and parents, in order to work in partnership for the benefit of all children.

These assumptions are expressed in sets of principles which are grouped into interactions (between staff and children, staff and parents, staff themselves); the program; nutrition, health and safety practices; and centre management and staff development.

Alongside the move to improve quality in child care services has been a change in funding which reflects large-scale ambivalence regarding the value of such
services. Child care has generally been undervalued and has received support in Australia only because of its links to employment and family policy (Press & Hayes, 2001). For many, child care services reflect an abrogation of parental responsibility (Sims & Hutchins, 1996) and, as such, are not perceived as deserving of large-scale governmental support. Certainly over the past few years, changes in funding to long day care services have been significant. For example, there was a reduction of $850 million in Commonwealth funding from 1996 to 1999 (Wannan, 2000). This has resulted in an increase for families in costs of child care, making child care unaffordable for some (Wannan, 2000). In addition there has been a loss of child care places with the closure of services. For example, from June to December 1998, 1300 child care places were lost (400 in the community and employer sector and 500 in the private/commercial sector). The majority of these closures were in low-income areas, further reducing accessibility of child care to low-income families (Wannan, 2000). Child care workers themselves are highly stressed. They are low-paid, and have experienced job losses; cuts to working hours; wages, and conditions of employment; and reduced career opportunities (Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 1998).

While the aim of the accreditation process is to encourage services to develop a quality focus for themselves [comparable to developing an internal locus of control (Feldman, 1995)], there is growing concern that financial pressures have compromised quality in many services struggling to remain open (Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 1998). Recent research (Sims, Hutchins & Dimovich, 2002), (Sims, 2003), and much anecdotal evidence from those involved in the industry, indicates instances where poor-quality service is delivered to children and families. The aim of this paper is to investigate further the quality concerns of a group of professionals who participate in the child care industry, with the aim of stimulating action to address the identified concerns.

SUPS workers (Supplementary Services workers) support the inclusion into children's services of children with disabilities, from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. In undertaking their work, SUPS workers visit many different children's services, providing support, training and information to caregivers to ensure the inclusion of the target children (Wallis Consulting Group PTY LTD, 1994). SUPS workers spend considerable time in centres, supporting and skilling staff, establishing and supporting relationships between caregivers and parents, and supporting staff in accessing necessary resources. Many SUPS workers are child-care trained. Others come from various other professional backgrounds, such as occupational therapy, psychology or teaching. SUPS workers have opportunities to experience child care practice over a range of different centres, and are thus in a position to comment, from their own perspective, on child care quality.

**Methodology**

**Research questions**

1. What do SUPS workers define as quality child care?
2. What examples of high-quality practices do SUPS workers report from their experiences?
3. What examples of low-quality practices do SUPS workers report from their experiences?

**Conceptual framework**

This research was undertaken from an interpretive perspective (Sarantakos, 1998). The phenomenological perspective as discussed by Crotty (1996) was used as a foundation: participants’ experiences were shared with the researcher, who sought to come to a joint understanding (Blumer, 1969) with the participants about their meaning for them.

**Participants**

Participants were workers employed by SUPS teams across Australia. Participation in the research was voluntary. A mailing list of interested SUPS workers was compiled at the 2000 national SUPS Conference. People who put their name on this list were approached by letter and invited to participate in the study. Thirty-eight SUPS workers responded to the invitation.

**Method**

SUPS workers were sent a written questionnaire. It was suggested that participants either complete the questionnaire individually or in groups. They were encouraged to respond in writing or to tape their
discussions and send the tape. Three individuals and four groups responded in writing. Three individuals asked for a phone interview which was later transcribed. One focus group was held, with the discussion taped and later transcribed.

**Analysis**

All data was analysed following the approach recommended by Colaizzi (1978), where themes were identified, coded and defined. Identification of themes was guided by the research questions: i.e. themes relating to definition of quality, and positive and negative experiences, were actively sought.

**Results**

**What do SUPS workers define as quality child care?**

A number of workers identified attitudes towards difference and diversity as critical components of quality care. This also links to the concept of respect; caregivers demonstrating respect for all, irrespective of difference or diversity. In the words of the SUPS workers themselves:

...enthusiasm for diversity rather than seeing it as a problem (Individual 1).

A centre that is open-minded and accepting of difference among families and the community... staff having the ability to respect difference that is out of their own 'moral' comfort zone (Group 3: 2 people).

The importance of attitudes in crafting quality care is well-recognised in the literature (Sims, 1997), (Sims, 1999) and is also recognised as an important factor to consider in the training of children's services workers (Sims, in review).

The way staff interact with children was also identified by a number of the SUPS workers as an important element in a quality service. Associated with the theme of interactions is the concept of trust and a safe (emotionally as well as physically) environment.

Quality care is the relationship between the workers and the children... actually playing with the children, getting down to them on their level (Individual 4).

Caregivers being in tune with the children, positive interactions... the caregivers actually interacting with the children rather than just telling them to go there, do that.

Being involved rather than supervising. That includes cuddling and loving the children (Group 5: 13 people).

The ability of workers to perceive and recognise individual children's needs and interests, and then to offer appropriate experiences, was another strong thread in a number of the definitions of quality service delivery.

Quality care is when staff can meet the child's individual needs – irrespective of their abilities (Group 4: 11 people).

...she had only been working with this child for 2 weeks. She had a whole file – she'd written obs every single day, she'd taken photos of him/her being included, she'd done absolutely everything (Group 5: 13 people).

A number of the workers identified flexibility as an important indicator of quality. The theme of flexibility was also aligned with ideas of openness, and willingness to learn and try new things.

...having the skills and knowledge to be flexible and change as the children's needs change... not having the centre so regimented that the way that they set their programme is in concrete (Group 5: 13 people).

One group identified the importance of nurturing staff in a quality service.

They've got fantastic written philosophies but the caregivers are just part of the furniture, that same philosophy doesn't reflect for the caregivers. The caregivers don't have a decent place to go and have a cup of tea, they're not nurtured, they have no non-contact time (Group 5: 13 people).

SUPS workers varied in their perception of how often they saw high and low quality care. Some felt that quality had declined significantly over the time of their involvement in the industry.

...huge lack of quality programmes and centres... 8-9% we consider to be quality (Group 2: 3 people).

...the quality of the service isn't as high as what it was during the 10 years I worked... percentage of good centres is probably 20% of really high quality services and the rest are pretty average (Individual 5).

One group wondered if they may be more exposed to lower-quality services, and this might influence their perceptions of the industry.
I just wonder if we've noticed it more because our role has changed ... I seem to be in far more centres than I ever used to be ... we see a big range ... the not good ones, they're really bad compared to before. They weren't that bad before but now they have deteriorated a lot more. The good ones have taken accreditation on board. Quality services don't need us so we tend to be spending more time with the other ones because they desperately need us (Group 5: 13 people).

What examples of high-quality practices do SUPS workers report from their experiences?
SUPS workers all gave examples of high-quality practice. Their stories all reflected elements of the principles identified above. One worker reported an incident which reflected a positive attitude towards diversity.

...recent enrolment of two toddlers with dark skin and very tightly-curl black hair. A 4-year-old from a different cultural background and with slightly lighter skin, but with tightly-curl black hair, became very excited. 'They've got the same hair as I do.' Her comments and enthusiasm were discussed openly, and the child's parents commented to staff on her enthusiasm as well (Individual 1).

A centre that is not particularly inviting, has limited resources, several trainees, limited staff qualifications and a parent wanting to place a child with severe physical limitations. Staff are very positive about the placement ... all staff want training as soon as possible. They want to discuss the needs of the child with the parents, all therapists involved and the SUPS worker. Meetings set up to do this. Physical environment discussed and changes are made — including some major changes (ramps etc.) over a period of one week! ... All staff attend training sessions on specific needs of this child. Staff are enthusiastic and not daunted by the prospect of caring for this child. Programming ideas discussed. Child placed in care — a caring environment, with the staff enthusiastic about caring for all children and feeling particularly proud of the effort they have made to meet the needs of this one child — results — one happy child, happy parents, contented staff feeling good about themselves and one very happy SUPS worker (Group 4: 11 people).

Examples of quality interactions focused on communication with families, rather than between caregivers and children.

I was sent to a centre recently, it was absolutely marvellous, just blew me away. They had things like newsletters for the parents, they have a box in the room with the child's name for all the updated information about the child and the parents pick it up when they come in ... one is so community minded she actually put on a morning tea for the parents and so many of the parents who are single and isolated, they all came. I just happened to be there that day, and what I saw was unbelievable, all these parents coming in bringing a plate, with food on, and sharing and just talking to each other and getting to know each other (Group 5: 13 people).

Workers felt caregivers who made time to implement the strategies they had worked out together to provide for the needs of individual children were providing a quality service.

...whether or not they have an additional worker, strategies that we've provided to encourage inclusion are being implemented and evaluated and an ongoing process of development and encouragement for the child (Individual 5).

This aspect is also captured in the flexibility and willingness of caregivers to learn and try new strategies.

After reading up and practising, and taking on board my comments about consistency, two of the staff both felt confident enough to do some work with persona dolls themselves ... they were thrilled with the children's responses. They talked openly about the child's wheelchair, about safety issues when the child was on the floor (how he wouldn't be able to move out of their way etc.), and about other new equipment (special chair, standing frame) ... sometime after this I visited the service and the teacher told me an incident where she had been changing x's nappy on the floor. A parent and child came into the room. The parent said: 'Watch out for the baby.' Just as the teacher was wondering how to respond, the usually shy child countered with: 'that's not a baby, that's child's name.' (Individual 1).

One worker identified a service that provided support to staff themselves.
...a service which gives programming time to all staff who work with children (not just trained staff) so they can plan and evaluate together. This is great for team building and for the self esteem of the untrained (but often experienced and occasionally wise!!) staff (Individual 3).

**What examples of low-quality practices do SUPS workers report from their experiences?**

SUPS workers gave many different examples of what they thought was low-quality practice. Many of the examples discussed by the SUPS workers involved issues relating to attitudes towards difference and diversity.

...the child was placed in the organisation's vacation care with no prior planning. When the service experienced difficulties, the SUPS team was contacted ... it was made clear by the Administrator that a special worker was needed so that the other staff could do their jobs properly... Negative comments were made to all and sundry about how hard this child was making things for their service (Individual 1).

OSHC asked to care for a child with autism. Co-ordinator discussed the options and said 'This won't work'. We suggested some staff training – opposed. Parent desperate for care and continued to suggest strategies – opposed. Co-ordinator of the unit spoke to co-ordinator of the OSHC – very negative. 'This is not the place for a child like that. Staff are too busy to be concerned about another child we have to watch all the time – the physical environment is not good' ... After first three sessions the SUPS co-ordinator received a phone call – very aggressive OSHC co-ordinator – 'That's it, I told you this would not work, s/he has pushed my staff and other children, screamed and kicked all day, I have asked him to leave.' ... Training was (again) suggested and we were told 'We don't need training, we have years of experience in child care' (Group 4: 11 people).

Other workers expressed concerns about the interactions experienced by the children, and the opportunities caregivers had to interact with parents.

The staff stand like Pentridge warders and talk about their weekends to each other. Children get attention when they do something wrong. Staff yell at them across the play yard. You can tell who's in trouble by listening (Individual 2).

Quite often they'll have one child care worker outside with more than their ratio of children, they tend to sit around and drink coffee, chat to each other instead of being with the children (Individual 4).

Workers often expressed concern about a lack of individualised or child-centred work practice.

The after school programme meets in one room. The activity is Smarties Bingo – everyone sits on the floor and plays the same activity. The playground outside is next to the parking lot – the children can only go there with a staff member. There are no activities brought out by staff and the equipment does not change ... (in another service) some of the children who were told to put on their sun screen were too young to know how and it wasn't followed up on (Individual 2).

... this child was actually receiving additional funding ... s/he was sat in a chair next to an open doorway between going in and out of the building so it was actually in the traffic flow, so the children were coming and bumping and knocking her/him and in the meantime nobody was actually talking to her/him or paying her/him any attention. The other children were moved into morning tea s/he was actually left outside until I brought her/him to their attention. Then they brought her/him inside and put her/him on a mat on the other side of the room because s/he made too much mess (Group 5: 13 people).

The demands on staff in centres often meant that staff were unable to be flexible in their approach to work.

...often the rate of staff turnover is that we are repeatedly going in and giving the same strategies over and over again, and often staff are so burnt out its just another job they're being asked to do and it's just too hard ... sometimes I've actually seen staff leave a room unattended and I've actually had to say you can't leave, because they've had to go and answer the phone (Group 5: 13 people).
SUPS workers often reported that the lack of support for caregivers made it very difficult to expect them to implement strategies.

Staff seem to be quite young, and I seem to be coming across a lot of co-ordinators who are really young, as in their early 20s, who I don’t think have the life experience to apply to the work environment … inadequate training comes into it as well (Individual 5).

We're seeing people accredited for three years when in actual fact we know, because we go in regularly, staff numbers aren't right. They're regularly not right. We know they're moving equipment round between services and they shouldn't be accredited for 5 minutes let alone 3 years (Individual 6).

A number of workers expressed concern about breaches of regulations, and felt impotent to implement changes. Different SUPS workers thought about this dilemma in different ways.

…we have a duty of care to the children but then our funding is linked to the child care service. We are measured from the Commonwealth Government in terms of our outputs … we are measured by the services that invite us in. If we report them to the licensing board then they are not going to invite us in. We're a small team. That means our statistics go down. That means in the commonwealth's eyes we're not doing our job and so it goes on. We're damned if we do and we're damned if we don't (Individual 6).

We're never going to improve the service by leaving, we have tried that before. One of the policies is that if everything isn't above board the SUPS workers will pull out until such time as it is rectified and then we'll notify the parents as to why they are not supporting the service and give the parent the opportunity to pull their child out if they have a choice (Group 5: 13 people).

Some workers felt that quality care depended greatly on the context and support available for caregivers themselves. One worker reported:

...when I walked into the room there was a staff member who I had seen at this other centre which was poor quality and I thought 'Oh … this is going to be hard work' but s/he was absolutely brilliant. S/he was in a very supportive environment and her/his skills were absolutely shining, absolutely brilliant and I've come across that particular thing on two or three occasions (Group 5: 13 people).

Clearly, the workers' experiences led them to believe that these contextual issues were, to a great extent, major contributors to the low-quality practices they identified. They indicated they felt caught in a bind. While their role was clearly to support the inclusion of their target child, caregivers appeared to need support in implementing quality services to ALL children, a role not part of the SUPS mandate.

… they have no support and at the end of the day our referral is for the child but we can't get to the child with all these other issues surrounding the issue and we find that on a daily basis … They're working under a huge strain and you don't blame them when they go outside and all they want to do is just stand there and supervise and not play with the children because they are so burnt out and they need that down time … they're not able to nurture themselves – their self esteem is very low as individual people, they're not able to relate to each other … I said how do you manage in that babies' room with 8 babies, it's so small, and she was like, no we've got 12, we're licensed for 8… (Group 5: 13 people).

Discussion

This project documents the perceptions of some SUPS workers across Australia, relating to quality of child care services. While there are clearly a number of high-quality services offering excellent learning environments for young children, there is also evidence of very poor-quality service delivery. Children who participate in low-quality child care services are more likely to demonstrate poor long-term outcomes. For example, Vandell (2001), reporting on the longitudinal study undertaken by NICHD Early Child Care Research Network in America, points out the negative behavioural outcomes for children in low-quality care. Work undertaken by Belsky (1999) also highlights the developmental risks associated with low-quality child care.

If Australian children are to be protected from these developmental risks, it is essential that intervention into the child care industry immediately address concerns about child care quality. Participants in this study doubt the efficacy of the accreditation process in making the
necessary changes. They also identify the high stress levels and lack of support available to staff as a primary cause of the low-quality services they report. These issues clearly need to be addressed in order to improve child care quality for ALL children and families.

Attempts to improve quality thus need to focus on:

1. widely publicising research which recognises the importance of quality experiences in the early years (to politicians, decision-makers, parents, professionals, other community members, etc.);

2. redressing the low-status image of those who work with young children. Caregivers and early childhood professionals should be as highly valued (and paid) as other professionals (such as doctors and lawyers) in our community;

3. establishing the importance of having a range of high-quality early childhood experiences available to ALL young children and their families;

4. reviewing the training for those who work with very young children to ensure they have the conceptual frameworks necessary to deliver high-quality services;

5. establishing a funding regime for child care which ensures that caregivers can work in an environment where it is reasonable to require them to offer consistent, high-quality service to ALL children and families;

6. establishing an effective system of quality control to ensure that all services consistently offer high-quality service delivery to ALL children and families.

Changing practice in child care is not an easy task. As long as caregivers’ work is undervalued and underpaid, low-quality services will remain. However, it is not appropriate to allow such practices to continue. It is time to argue for the rights of young children to experience quality every day of their lives. Changing their child care experiences is only one step (but a very important one) on the way towards creating the clever nation of tomorrow.

Reference List


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Developing quality sociodramatic play in the classroom for young children with language delays

Nicki McCullough Calabrese
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Research suggests that play is not simply a luxury, but a critical component of programs for all young children. One of the primary reasons for this strong support of play is research that has indicated its potent impact upon social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Sociodramatic play, in particular, has been shown to correlate with these areas of development, especially language development. This article discusses guidelines for promoting sociodramatic play in classrooms for young children with language delays.

Why play?

Historically, there have been philosophical and theoretical differences between early childhood educators and special education professionals regarding the role of play in the development of young children. In the field of early childhood education, a child-centred approach, in which play is considered a critical component of developmentally appropriate programs, is embraced by the profession (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The field of special education, on the other hand, has been heavily influenced by behavioural principles that emphasize teacher-directed programs which include direct instruction strategies for specific skill development (Anastasiow, 1978; Englemann & Carine, 1982; Jobling, 1988; Safford, 1989). Given the above history, it is not surprising that play is more prevalent in classrooms of children without handicaps and is often rejected in the classrooms of children with special needs, where it can be viewed as haphazard and non-directive (Widerstrom, 1983).

One of the primary reasons for this strong support of play is research which has shown it to have an especially potent impact upon language development (Carter, 1989; Coffee, 1984; Isbell & Raines, 1991; Levy, 1986; Odom, 1994; Smilansky, 1990; Pelligrini, 1990; Williamson & Silvern, 1990; Piaget, 1962; and Vygotsky, 1934). Sociodramatic play, in particular, a form of voluntary social play activity in which young...
children participate, has been shown to be especially effective in their language development (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Pellegrini & Galda, 1990). In light of recent research, it appears that children whose primary handicap is language development might benefit more from educational play than from the direct instructional strategies which dominate special education programs, especially in the early primary grades.

It is interesting to note that, in an exploration of the effects of direct instruction and child-centred curricula, such as play, for young children with disabilities, Cole, Mills and Dale (1989) found that neither model was superior. These researchers concluded that, rather than continuing a rivalry over which instructional model was best, it might be more productive to provide students with the advantages of both. This suggests that teachers might productively employ child-centred as well as direct instruction strategies in their classrooms.

**What is sociodramatic play?**

Sociodramatic play is a unique form of play. It is voluntary social play in which children use their imaginations and creativity. They take on different roles, participate in conversations, use manipulatives, and engage in print rich environments. According to Smilansky and Shefatya (1990), sociodramatic play is characterized by the following components:

1. children have time, space, and evocative objects;
2. it is a cooperative enterprise;
3. it is characterized by personal freedom;
4. it develops according to a pre-defined theme;
5. it is an expressive world of make-believe yet is reality bound;
6. players must be understood by other players in order to achieve continuity.

**Why promote sociodramatic play?**

Recent research is consistent in its support of play as a highly appropriate vehicle for the development of young children socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Campbell & Foster, 1993; Nourot & VanHoorn, 1991; Odom et al., 1990; Pellegrini & Galda, 1990; Roskos & Neuman, 1993; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Sociodramatic play, in particular, has been shown to be especially effective for promoting these skills (Elkind, 1993; Fromberg, 1997; Kennedy, 1991; Levy, Wolfgang & Koorkland, 1992; Pellegrini & Galda, 1990; Shefatya & Smilansky, 1990; Taharally, 1991). Since play, which is child-centred, is a preferred activity for most children, motivation tends to be higher than with more academic teacher-directed activities. This increase in motivation, along with research that supports sociodramatic play as having a high correlation with social, emotional, physical and cognitive development, creates a strong argument for its inclusion in the curriculum of all early childhood programs, both for children with and without disabilities.

**Why promote sociodramatic play for children with language delays?**

Goodman (1994) suggests that where play does exist in special education programs, it is often treated as a reward or a temporary escape from work. Yet research strongly suggests that play is not simply a luxury but a critical component of programs for all young children (ACEI/Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Campbell & Foster, 1993; Christie, 1990; Isbell & Raines, 1991; Levy, 1992; Pellegrini, 1985; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

In spite of consistent support for play as an important strategy for language development in young children, many early childhood programs for children with special needs continue to embrace direct teaching models which allow little time for play (Sheehan, Bordner & Berkley, 1992). Odom et al. (1990), for example, found that programs for children without disabilities include twice as much time for play as do programs for children with disabilities. This study explored the echobehavioural variables in early childhood special education classes. The sample for this study included 28 classrooms with 127 children, both with and without disabilities. A laptop computer was used to provide a checklist for classifying observations in 15-second time samples. More than 18,000 minutes of data were recorded, with an average of 145 minutes per child. This study found that play had the highest probability for supporting socialization and language development and that sociodramatic play, in particular, was significantly (p.5) more effective than other forms of play. Odom concluded:
The most notable differences between the two types of settings were in the proportion of play, which occurred nearly twice as often in the early education classrooms (children without disabilities). When behavioural engagement within play activities was examined, pretend play (sociodramatic) was the single form of child engagement that elevated peer verbal interaction (p.327).

Sociodramatic play is well supported as an excellent strategy for promoting language development. Ironically, it appears to be a strategy that is more prevalent in classrooms for children without disabilities. Perhaps it should be as strongly embraced in programs for children with language delays.

How can we create quality sociodramatic play?

The process of designing appropriate sociodramatic play in classrooms for young children requires a combination of student-centred and teacher-directed strategies. It usually begins with defining a specific physical space in the classroom that can be used to create a sociodramatic centre. Introduce this centre to children individually or in small groups to ensure that they are aware of the possibilities for future play. Some suggestions for sociodramatic play centre themes are: grocery store, space center, doctor’s office/clinic, campground, the mall, movie theatre, bakery, art gallery, ice-cream parlour, greenhouse, beauty parlour, fitness centre, restaurant, pet shop, gas station/garage, pizzeria, toy store, construction site, flea market, beauty parlour, fitness centre, restaurant, pet shop, gas station/garage, pizzeria, toy store, construction site, flea market, greenhouse, pet shop.

The role of the teacher is to create an exciting centre, facilitate the storylines, evaluate the play, and make appropriate modifications. Students enrolled in an early childhood program at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York, discovered that this is not an easy task! As a requirement for an early childhood course, students created, facilitated, and critiqued sociodramatic play centres in local classrooms. In discussions with the students and with their cooperating teachers, the following guidelines emerged:

1. Choose themes that are of special interest and familiar to the students (see The Learning Center Book by Isbell for many creative ideas).
2. Ensure that there is a variety of distinct roles that children can assume while participating in the centre.
3. Create a print-rich environment. Label every object and space. Provide materials and opportunities for the children to read, write, listen, and speak.
4. Design the centre in a specific area of the classroom, which is safe, attractive, and inviting.
5. Provide a variety of manipulatives, which are realistic and yet still leave room for children’s imaginations. Be conscious of the durability of all materials.
6. Rotate the materials. Do not use every object simultaneously. Include new manipulatives and roles on a regular basis.
7. Never interfere with their storylines (unless to do so would be unsafe). The children will create situations you never dreamed of!
8. Introduce vocabulary to be practised in the centre in a variety of ways. We want the children to use words that are new to them. This can be accomplished in a multitude of ways, such as reading storybooks and singing songs on the same theme. Children with language delays will need to have new vocabulary modelled by the teacher or other students.
9. Thoughtfully consider any rules that may be necessary for your particular group of children. Sociodramatic play centres tend to be popular, and you may want to anticipate possible problems that may require classroom guidelines.
10. Realize that the role of the teacher is substantially different when working with children with language delays as opposed to children without such delays. The teacher must be cognisant of opportunities to facilitate participation in the centre. The teacher must carefully monitor and evaluate the quality of play and intervene whenever the play becomes stagnant.
11. Have a grand opening! This may include a ribbon cutting or inviting a special guest. This can help create enthusiasm and excitement for your sociodramatic play centre.
Conclusion
It has been my experience in the classroom that all young children not only enjoy participating in sociodramtic play but also develop academic, physical, emotional, and social skills. However, there is no blueprint that gives us specific instructions. Our role as the 'stage manager' (Jones & Reynolds, 1992) is crucial to the success of the children's play. Creating, implementing, and evaluating sociodramtic play is an ongoing process that will differ with each new group of young children, whether or not they have disabilities. Personally, I have found this process to be challenging, productive, and exciting for both my students and myself.

References
Parental perceptions of computer-based gaming technology: An evaluation of children’s leisure pursuits in the computer age

Belinda Clayton

This study is a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the primary leisure pursuits of children in the computer age. In a society dominated by electronic media, the conceptualisation of ‘leisure’ is rapidly changing and there is a perception that children are increasingly using technology as entertainment. In light of growing concerns that there may be an association between the use of television-based video games such as *Playstation and *Nintendo, and the increasing number of childhood behavioural disorders being diagnosed, these leisure pursuits are worthy of further investigation. The quantitative component of this research is a comparative analysis of leisure activities of six-to-eight-year-old children by gender. The qualitative component draws from parental responses to open-ended questions. The findings confirm the assumption that boys spend substantially more time engaged with interactive technological pursuits than do girls of the same age. However, the findings also suggest there is a growing level of parental anxiety concerning this social phenomenon. The parental concerns expressed in this study justify exploration, especially considering that this data reflects personal and confidential, first-hand observations of the physical and mental health of children.

Introduction

Childhood is predominantly a time for leisure. Recent acknowledgement of the importance of the relationships children form with people and their environment during their early years has required a continuous re-evaluation of the leisure activities that occupy this time. Children are vulnerable and their physical and mental wellbeing depends on the monitoring of these relationships. The activities through which children interact with their environment have an enormous capacity to influence their perceptions of the world and impinge on their capacity to live a happy and fulfilled childhood.

Recent studies suggest that children are using technology daily and extensively for entertainment (Rosen & Weil, 2001; Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Kasen & Brook, 2002). A quantitative survey by Rosen and Weil (2001) was conducted with seven-to-nine-year-old children to establish the implications of technological entertainment. This research found that pre-teens played computer-based video games on average for three hours per day. This amounted to one hour per day longer than teens who played for two hours per day, and two hours longer than young adults who played for one hour per day. It was found that boys engaged in this type of activity more often than girls did, and it was suggested that computer and video game playing increased misbehaviour.

Although the association between television viewing and aggressive behaviour has been well-documented by Rosen and Weil (2001) and Johnson et al. (2002), the present study seeks to understand parental perceptions of this type of entertainment, and particularly focuses on the attitudes of parents towards the use of *Playstation/*Nintendo television-based video games.
**Literature Review**

Computer-based technology has firmly established itself as a mainstream source of entertainment. The marketing and hype surrounding the release of the latest technological innovations has ensured that electronic entertainment has secured its place as a popular choice of leisure pursuit. But are there uncertain consequences for extensive amounts of time being spent engaging in computer-based gaming technology? Current research by Rosen and Weil (2001) suggests that computer-based leisure pursuits may be a cause for concern.

Rosen and Weil's (2001) study found that a greater amount of time spent playing electronic games is related to misbehaviour. However, this study was mainly concerned with the social and psychological implications of children being exposed to violent and aggressive images. The concerns of the present survey are not whether the content is psychologically damaging, but whether interaction with the technology itself is detrimental to the physiological wellbeing of children. Neurologist Dr John Watson (2002, quoted in Tuohy, 2002, p. 12) suggests there are biological repercussions when children interact with technology, as these games often demand an increased circulation of stress hormones throughout the body. He has found that this type of activity can interfere with the development of neural networks and physically reduce the capacity for concentration.

While this study and other research has found that computer-based video games are predominantly boys’ activities (Rosen & Weil, 2001), coincidentally or consequently there are substantially higher levels of diagnosis of behavioural disorders such as ADHD for boys than for girls (Barkley, 1991). Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) has been primarily understood as a condition resulting from a reduced capacity for concentration. The 4th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1994) describes this most prevalent childhood disorder as ‘a persistent pattern of inattentive behaviour and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that is more frequent and severe than is typically observed in individuals of the same developmental level’. Neurological findings are increasingly suggestive of the inability of the brain to process the sensory overload of the 21st century without consequences (Mattingley, 2002, quoted in Tuohy, 2002, p. 10). The need for speed is the founding principle upon which computer-based gaming technology maintains its popularity. The growing use of technology for entertainment has arguably created biological symptoms reflective of this hyper lifestyle (Rostas, 2002, quoted in Tuohy 2002, p.12). Persistent levels of reflex stimulus are necessary for the challenges invited by most computer-based video games such as *Playstation* and *Nintendo*. Games of this genre have even been associated with epileptic seizures, with one doctor going so far as to label the phenomenon ‘Nintendo epilepsy’ (Guver, 2002).

Technological innovation has provided children (and adults), with an entirely new concept of recreation. According to Greenfield (1993), technological entertainment such as television and computer-based video games provides a readily available source of relaxation and positive stimulation for the imagination, as well as the opportunity to retreat from the stresses of everyday life. However, the extensive use of computer-based entertainment appears to have considerable physiological repercussions. In light of MRI scanning that has allowed the brains of sufferers of behavioural disorders such as ADHD to be closely studied, research suggests that the impact of flashing screens and flashing lights over time may modify neuronal development (O’ Shea, 2002 quoted in Tuohy, 2002: 12). Locating a single fundamental cause for this most prevalent childhood disorder (ADHD) seems unlikely; however, there is room in the existing literature to consider a possible association between increased computer-based video game playing and the emergent childhood behavioural disorders of the 21st century.

**Method**

The present study was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The emphasis was on identifying the different leisure activities that consume the time of six-to-eight-year-old children. A survey was conducted over a four-week period in April and May 2002 during the Australian school term. Forty surveys were distributed randomly by hand at the location of the participating school. Data was gathered from a Year 1 sample of 15 six-to-eight-year-old girls and 15 six-to-eight-year-old boys. The children attended an urban
public school situated in a medium-to-high socio-economic demographic in the Sydney metropolitan area. The parents/carers of these children were the respondents to this survey.

A time-use diary was employed for the quantitative component of this study, as this study required observation in a closed domestic environment. The diary was filled in by a parent/carer of the child over the course of one typical weekday afternoon from 3.30pm until bedtime. As individual schools tend to allocate particular days for extra curriculum activities such as PSSA sport training and band practice, it was decided that a weekday of the participant’s choice would provide a more representative response. Additionally, the diary was filled in over a full day from 9.00am to bedtime on either Saturday or Sunday and multiplied by two to produce a weekend daily average. For their convenience, the participants decided whether they would document their child’s activities on either a Saturday or a Sunday. It was not deemed necessary to delineate between Saturday and Sunday activities, as changes to the standard working week, which have consequently led to changing consumer habits, make Saturdays and Sundays less clearly demarcated. In particular, market research company A C Neilsen has found that, since retail trading has gradually extended from weekdays and Saturday mornings to Saturday afternoons, night trading, and currently Sunday trading, people no longer shop at any particular time (Neilsen, 2002). Also, as the survey did not differentiate between organised and unorganised outdoor activities, there could be no assumption that Saturdays (typically dedicated to organised sporting activities) would provide a greater statistic for ‘outdoor’ pursuits.

Although the survey requested primary and secondary activities to be specified, for the purpose of this study only the primary activity was calculated. The diary was followed by a questionnaire that consisted of closed questions. The respondents rated the suggested leisure activities in order of their child’s preferences. The results of this section of the study were analysed by gender. The qualitative stage of this research consisted of a questionnaire that posed open-ended questions to the parents/carers who had responded to the time-use diary.

Results

Of the 40 surveys distributed 34 were returned by the due date. To divide the sample equally by gender, four surveys were randomly excluded, reducing the total to 30. The response rate was particularly high, as the researcher was personally familiar with the participants of the target school.

The results of the survey are displayed in the tables below and are divided into the six most popular leisure activities according to the amount of time allocated to the pursuit. ‘Computer games’ consisted of the use of computer technology to play interactive games, engage in chat, surf the Net, and type. The category of ‘Television/video’ represented the time spent passively engaged in viewing. ‘Playstation’ consisted of any interactive gaming technology that is connected to a television, including ‘Nintendo’ and ‘Black Box’ as well as the hand-held version ‘Gameboy’. ‘Indoor play’ included drawing, playing with board games, cards, chess, dolls, etc. ‘Outdoor play’ grouped together any activity that was played outside, including organised sporting activities such as soccer, netball and football, and unorganised sports such as rollerblading, bike-riding and swimming. ‘Homework’ included general homework activities, music practice/lessons, and the activity of reading, as well as being read to. Other factors such as eating, dressing, bathing, socialising, shopping, and travelling were considered and analysed. These categories are not included in this table. However, they have been separately accounted for and, therefore, the activity headings listed in the table are representative of only the broad leisure-related categories.
Occasionally, the respondents failed to distinguish between particular activities and the time spent engaged with each one. This resulted in a grouping of two or three activities (e.g. eating, dressing, and watching television) within the one timeframe, making analysis inaccurate. For this reason the original sample size of 30 (15 girls and 15 boys) was reduced to 20. The hours and minutes recorded represent the amount of time each child spent engaging in the particular leisure pursuit. The results were tabulated according to the daily average amount of time spent engaged with each activity after school and also according to the daily average amount of time spent engaged with each activity over the course of a full weekend day.

TABLE 2
Distribution by gender of average hours and minutes spent engaging in leisure activities on a daily basis over weekend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Weekend 6 – 8-year-old boy</th>
<th>Weekend 6 – 8-year-old girl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>30 mins</td>
<td>18 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television/Video</td>
<td>1 hour 18 mins</td>
<td>1 hour 30 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playstation</td>
<td>1 hour 24 mins</td>
<td>24 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor</td>
<td>1 hour 24 mins</td>
<td>2 hours 12 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor</td>
<td>4 hours 24 mins</td>
<td>2 hours 42 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>12 mins</td>
<td>13 mins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted a study of "Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities" (2000) and revealed that television/video viewing consumed the most leisure time for five-to-fourteen-year-old girls and boys equally, a statistic supported by the results of this survey. The same study found that boys spent significantly more time playing sport and playing video games such as *Playstation than girls did, a result mirrored in the six-to-eight-year-old sample of this study. In the present study on a scale rating of most popular to least popular activity, six out of 10 parents wrote that their boys would choose *Playstation as their first preference. Only one parent of the girl sample wrote that she would choose *Playstation as her first preference. Six out of the 10 parents of both gender samples nominated 'outdoor' activities as their child's second preference.

Results

Themes of parental concern

Although the results of the time-use diary reflected previous findings that boys were far more inclined to choose technology-based entertainment than girls were (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000; Rosen & Weil, 2001; Johnson et al., 2002), there are a few variations that warrant further investigation. Drawing from the qualitative component and comparing these results with previous studies, parental concern about technological entertainment has increased. The most recent study by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2000) that investigated children's participation in leisure activities suggested that only a minority of parents (25 per cent) were concerned about the amount of time their children were spending watching television and playing computer/video games such as *Playstation. The results of the present study indicated that 50 per cent of the parents expressed concern about these activities, with this figure increasing to 60 per cent for the parents of boys.

The concern of parents was not focused on the usual anxiety around TV/video or video game content from a psychological perspective; rather, the concern was for the physical and behavioural repercussions of engaging in these non-active leisure activities.

They are a lot of fun but the amount of time spent on them needs to be limited. I think it's not good for their brain or eyes and can stop them wanting to do other activities sometimes.

When parents were asked to comment on their own perception of computer-based gaming technology, there was a similar theme echoed in 90 per cent of the responses given by the parents of these young boys.

I feel anxious as he becomes frustrated and cranky when he can't achieve a certain level in a game. It can make him more aggressive and grumpy like he needs some fresh air.

One respondent was concerned at the prospect of her young sons upgrading their *Gameboy (hand-held) for the *Playstation machine possessed by many of their peers. This respondent wrote that the *Gameboy was banned for the following reasons:

- 'The boys will be totally consumed by it';
- 'They will not co-operate';
- 'They cannot focus on anything else (homework, dressing for school, playing)';
- 'I feel like I don't have any control over them';
- 'It affects social skills because they are not communicating';
- '*Gameboy is given priority over everything else'.

Consequently, this respondent wrote 'I dare not think what would happen if we had a Playstation although the kids want one.'

The results of this survey clearly reflect the perception that boys are far more enticed by technological pursuits such as *Playstation. There was a general consensus among the parents/carers who participated in the questionnaire that it was important to balance this type of activity with outdoor pursuits. Most parents commented that they encouraged regular outdoor activity, as revealed in the survey, with boys spending substantially more time outdoors than girls did: 'X spends a significant amount of time at *Nintendo; however, this is largely balanced with many and various sporting activities on weekends and after school.'
Research that suggests boys who spend substantial amounts of time engaging in technological activities are more prone to behavioural disorders is supported by the results of the present study, which reveals the majority of girls are not interested in gaming technology. The parents/carers of the girls consistently made comments suggesting that they were excluded from the allure of the *Playstation phenomenon. ‘My daughter only remembers to play on the *Playstation when her brothers are on it. If it weren't for her brother she would never play it.’

As leisure time becomes increasingly ‘electronic’ parental concerns are increasing. Computer-based video games and other associated visual mediums are often linked to the increasing levels of childhood obesity (Anderson, 1998). However, the respondents to this survey expressed more concern over the raised level of anxiety their children experienced during and after their interaction with this technology. The boys in this study were shown to spend twice as much time as girls did engaging in outdoor activities at the weekend, which may account for the lack of comment concerning the association between inactivity and childhood obesity.

**Findings**

The primary issue identified from the parental concerns expressed in the present study's survey is the perception that the use of gaming technology such as *Playstation creates a raised level of anxiety in their children.

One of the most difficult issues facing child care workers today is the management of children with behavioural disorders, and, although all children can be defiant and challenging from time to time, the plethora of childhood behavioural disorders emerging is disturbing. Studies consistently suggest that boys are overwhelmingly more likely to suffer from these disorders than are girls (Australian Broadcasting Association, 1995; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000; Australian Psychological Society, 2001). In light of the current findings in neuroscience that suggest that the way the brain is used has physiological implications, an association between boys’ preference for computer-based gaming technology and childhood behavioural disorders warrants further investigation.

**Conclusion**

This study has explored the parental attitudes to children’s choices of leisure pursuits in the computer age and has found a general consensus that extensive amounts of time spent interacting with video games such as *Playstation was detrimental to the child’s mental and physical health. By drawing on subjective reflection, it was clear that parental perceptions of gaming technology were predominantly negative. The quality and depth of the responses reflected the respondents’ desire to express deep-seated angsts about the *Playstation phenomenon that they had only ever previously shared amongst themselves.

This study revealed parental concerns about the physiological repercussions of extensive use of gaming technology. The parents/carers who took part in the study were physically available to observe behavioural changes in their child. They were informed and willing to make changes to the child’s routine (e.g. encourage outdoor activity), if they felt their child’s wellbeing was being jeopardised by the extensive use of gaming technology. It would be interesting to consider further whether children who are not encouraged to balance extensive amounts of time interacting with *Playstation games with extra physical activity are at a greater risk of developing childhood behavioural disorders.

The results of this study suggest that gaming technology is unanimously the preferred choice of leisure activity for six-to-eight-year-old boys, while girls of the same age preferred to spend more time engaged in indoor activities, such as writing and drawing or interacting with computer programs. The strong preference for boys to choose technology for entertainment over any other activity is a reality that has been clearly recognised by the parents/carers of these children. As parents and carers are the chief observers of childhood behaviour, it is necessary to take note when such concerns are voiced. Neurological research supports this study, which suggests that these parents/carers may be intuiting something as equally debilitating to their child’s wellbeing as the psychological effects of violent/aggressive messages and images.
References


Beginning School Together: Sharing Strengths

Edited by Sue Dockett and Bob Perry

This book deals with relationships in the classroom, issues of funding, how to plan a successful program, issues of cross-cultural communication and the importance of community input, among other topics. It is also filled with real life scenarios, and practical ideas and suggestions on how a transition program can make starting school a smooth and easy experience for all involved.

To order: Beginning School Together $25.95
Call toll free 1800 356 900 or Email eca@earlychildhood.org.au
Children talk about their early experiences at school

Gillian Potter
Freda Briggs
University of South Australia

Researchers have explored the issues associated with transition policies, practices, and children's readiness for school. They have collected parents' and teachers' attitudes towards and feelings about children starting school. However, little attention has been given to the voices of children in this matter.

This paper reports on the perspectives of one-hundred children aged 5-6 years on their early experiences of school. The first section explores some of the literature relevant to starting school and the emerging international research trend to giving children a voice in matters that concern them. The second discusses the research methodology and findings. These indicate that, while most children settle in well to school, many have concerns about the affective domain of the school environment, the fear of punishment, being bored, and the lack of choice. While just over half of the children liked school most of the time, 83 per cent of them said they did not like school work, which they clearly defined in their own words.

Transition to school: A critical time in the child's life

Transition from preschool to school can be a challenge for children, parents, caregivers, and early years teachers. They must manage change, tension and uncertainty relating to children's reactions to the social and physical differences of the school environment and the different expectations of their behaviour. It is not surprising that school entry is referred to as a major life change, a vital turning point, and a time of great stress (Christensen, 1998). Young children's early adjustment and attainment at school sets boundaries on later attainment: a 'slow start' often means carrying a record of failure. A 'good start' provides a competitive advantage throughout the child's schooling (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994).

What the literature says about starting school

A range of studies has examined transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2001; Kagan & Newman, 1998). Most report adults' perspectives on children's abilities to adjust to the comparatively inflexible school organization. Teachers dwell on the children's abilities to operate in a large group, exercise independence, and interact effectively with other children and adults. Parents focus on children 'fitting into school' and making friends. Arising from the findings have come guidelines for 'getting young children ready' for school. Little has been written about the schools' readiness for the new arrivals. Notable exceptions to this are Wong and Wong (1998), in their book titled How to be an Effective Teacher: The First Days of School, and Fisher (1996) in her publication Starting from the Child? Briggs and Potter (1999) called for professional sensitivity to young children's early days at school and clarified those elements of the school environment that can cause trauma for the young child. They also identified the need for schools to work closely with parents and pre-school educators.

Not much has been written about children's perspectives on starting school. However, studies by Clyde (2001), Perry, Dockett and Howard (2000), and Ramey, Lanzi, Philips and Ramey (1998) have explored and reported upon children's views. Generally it was found that most children adjusted to school well but, not unexpectedly, were very much influenced by the school environment, demands, expectations, teaching and management styles. Perry, Dockett and Tracey (1998) interviewed parents, teachers and children on such topics as 'What does it mean to be
ready for school?' ‘Who is responsible for getting children ready for school?’ ‘What should be done to help children become ready for school?’ They found that the overwhelming concern of children was about the rules of school, as opposed to parents and teachers who were more concerned with the children’s adjustment and disposition.

Clyde (2001) reported children’s comments, verbatim. She questioned them about their impressions of the big kids, how they found the first day of school, how they felt on the first day, and how they got ready for school. Clyde concluded that young children experience transition to school as a qualitative shift; they worry about not knowing what to do, being hassled by the big kids, not being allowed to touch (cuddle) the teachers, and not being allowed to play. They already differentiated play from work. ‘You really, really try to concentrate hard when you’re working but not when you’re playing’ (p.31).

Recognising the need to listen to children

There is a slow though growing, international movement to foreground children’s perceptions and constructions of their life’s experiences (Oakley, 1994; Qvortrup, 1990). This is an important movement away from the notion that because children are egocentric, they cannot reason in a rational manner and therefore what they say about their experiences is of limited value. In the past, most studies of young children have emphasised an external view of children’s knowledge, thoughts and competency. Oakley and Qvortrup argue that children as a group have been excluded by the social sciences just as women were two decades ago. There is growing criticism of the pervasive dominance of psychological models of child development and children’s voicelessness (Mayall, 1994). Sociologists and educators are beginning to recognise the importance of understanding how children construct aspects of their experiences within home and school contexts (Doverborg & Pramling, 1993; Qvortrup, 1990). The study on which this paper reports is part of the international movement to listen to children’s voices.

The study in focus

The aims

The large study from which this current analysis has been drawn explored how children aged 5-9 years perceived their world. It included their views on family, school, religion, sex roles, safety, justice, relationships, and responsibilities.

The larger sample (This is being described as a way of contextualising the sub-sample that is the focus of this paper)

Three-hundred-and-eleven 5-9 year-olds from 35 different ethnic groups participated in the large study. Table 1 shows the range of ethnic groups.

| TABLE 1 |
| Participant ethnic groups N=35 |
| Aboriginal Australian | Filipino | Pakistani |
| African | German | Rumanian |
| American | Greek | Russian |
| Australian of European descent | Indian | Saudi |
| Cambodian | Irish | Scottish |
| Canadian | Israeli | Sri Lankan |
| Chinese | Italian | Taiwanese |
| Croatian | Korean | Thai |
| English | Laotian | Vietnamese |
| Ethiopian | Malaysian | Welsh |
| Finnish | New Zealand: Maori | Yugoslavian |
| Fijian | New Zealand: European descent | |
Thirty four per cent classified themselves as Australians with no other ethnic links, 25.5 per cent as Australian with ethnic links, 11 per cent as Aboriginal, and 30 per cent as ‘other ethnic groups’. The sample was balanced for gender and representative of Australia’s diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, family composition, geographical location, and ability. Social-support agencies facilitated access to children with disabilities, single-parent families, children under threat of domestic violence, and NESB children. Participants attended 75 schools representing state, independent, and religious systems. Two state schools catered for children with special needs. Five children who lived in remote areas were interviewed by radio-telephone through the Open-Access College. Seventy per cent of the children lived with two parent figures and most had siblings. Twenty-one per cent lived in single-parent families, four per cent lived with adults in de-facto relationships, two per cent with grandparents, and three per cent in very complex family situations.

The method
Following a pilot project, an interview schedule consisting of 100 forced choice and open questions was devised. All children were interviewed individually by the writers. Children talked about whether or not they liked school, the best and worst aspects of school, what teachers did to make them feel happy/sad, what they needed to do to please their teachers, and whether they thought their teachers were fair or unfair. The forced choice responses were quantitatively analysed using SPSS and the responses to the open-ended questions were analysed in grounded theory style as opposed to a priori. That is to say that children’s responses were categorised; these categories were generated as they emerged from the data rather than being identified beforehand. In this paper, verbatim quotes are used to offer some insight into the children’s views.

The paper focuses only on what the children aged 5-6 years (N=100; 50 girls/50 boys) said about their early experiences in their first year at school. This sub-sample (approximately one-third of the total) is representative of the total cohort.

The findings
Talking about liking/disliking school
While two-thirds (68.3%) of the children said they liked school all or most of the time, the rest said that they do not like school much or ‘not at all.’ Eighty-three per cent said they did not like ‘work’. ‘Work’ to the children was typically what the teacher tells you to do even though you’re not interested; what you have to do when you’d rather be doing something else; the stuff that’s boring; when you can’t choose and you have to do it. Work was something that was inflicted; children did not like the lack of choice. There was a direct link to their liking/disliking of the teacher and the subject taught. Specifically, in one school, none of the children liked Spanish because they did not like the teacher who yelled at them. Children also mentioned sitting on the floor for too long; getting into trouble; strict teachers that tell you off; when they give you time out and punish you; when teachers ask you hard questions and you can’t answer them.

Conversely, when the children discussed what they liked about school, 31 per cent referred to the teacher giving them choices of activities, 17 per cent spoke of playing with their friends, while 33.6 per cent enjoyed the teachers praising them for good work. Specific examples of the best aspects of school included:

The free activities when you can get to choose; Sometimes you can choose to play the things you want like soccer; Teachers let us do things we want to do sometimes; You can play with your friends and have fun; Playing! When teachers give you stickers for good work and pat you on the head; Teachers give lollies and stickers and early minutes when you’re good and do good work.

Further analysis of the pattern of responses reveals that the six-year-olds liked school less than did the five-year-olds, with the sample being evenly divided between five and six-year-olds: 81.8 per cent of the five-year-olds liked school all or most of the time compared with 70.6 per cent of the six-year-olds. Girls and boys indicated different response patterns. More than half of the girls claimed to like school all or most of the time, compared with only one-quarter of the boys. Moreover, 33 per cent of the boys said they disliked school compared with only six per cent of the girls. So, in the early years of school, boys are already saying that they dislike school. Some insight into why this might be so can
be gained through the exploration of the children's responses to what is best/worst about school. Some of the boys' comments on the best and worst things about school included:

PE and Sport are best; I like playing out at recess and lunch; Sport at recess and on Fridays – footy's my favourite; Fitness and Art are real cool; You have fun things like painting and drawing and music; When the teacher talks all day – boring; Writing and sitting on the floor for too long: makes your legs ache; Spelling – yuck; When they give you time-out or when you have to stay in at break or lunch time to finish your work.

Boys indicated in their responses that playing sport was the best thing about school, and their preference for sport exceeded girls' at each age. Perhaps the clue here is that boys find the regular classroom physically constraining. If so, this has implications for teachers in relation to the level of mobility allowed for the children in the classroom setting.

Talking about their teachers

The children responded to several questions about their teachers. The first related to what teachers do to make children feel good. There were four key themes in the children's responses:

1. Being taught in fun ways along with being allowed to do interesting work that they were good at (25%):

   They provide really interesting activities; Letting you do work that you really like such as 'odds and evens'. They tell you that you're really good. They come in and say, 'What beautiful boys you have Mrs B… '; She lets me do work – specially reading – that I do well. She praises me for good work and makes me feel great.

2. Extrinsic rewards and praise; receiving some form of affirmation of their efforts and good behaviour (21%).

   If everyone is good, we each get a jelly bean; They give us stickers and rewards for good work; She gives me stamps and lets me be the person to take the messages around.

   Children also liked being told they were good or had tried hard: She pats me on the shoulder and says 'Good girl'; They say 'That was a pretty good try' when you try hard. You don't have to get it right but you must try hard.

3. Being cared for and being helped with their work: having the difficult explained; being assisted to complete difficult tasks; teachers being patient when the children ‘get stuck’ and giving fun activities when the work is hard; being spoken to nicely; being hugged; being assisted to make friends in their early days at school; and being cared for when they are unwell (19%).

   Sometimes they're bad tempered and then I'm unhappy. Some we love more than others. How they behave is really important; When they talk nicely; They put band-aids on your cuts when you fall over and take care of you when you're sad; It's good when you can tell the teacher about the bad things that have happened to you and she listens and says that she believes you; When they speak quietly to you when you don't understand; My new teacher gave me a buddy to help me make friends.

4. Being given free activities and choices; feeling good when the teacher is happy and having good reports sent home to parents (18%).

   Free activities like Lego; When we can choose things like computer, free activities or reading; When they're nice, I'm happy; Kind teachers. A really nice teacher takes us on Wednesdays. And good reports to mum and dad - that's cool.

One child said that everything the teacher did made him/her happy. There were other varied responses that could not be themed. Sadly, there were six children who said the teachers did nothing to make them feel good.

The second question in relation to teachers asked what they do to make children feel bad/sad/unhappy. Consistent with previous responses, teachers yelling and screaming at children was by far the most common concern (42%). Such words as yell, scream, shout, talk loudly, tell off, stamp and growl were used to describe the most disliked behaviours. However, 25 per cent of the children said their teachers did nothing to make them feel bad or sad. Punishment and, in particular, unfair punishment was the only other strong theme that appeared (20%): They punish you when someone else did it and you were 'dubbed' in but they didn't bother to find out; They tell you off when everyone else is there and blame you when they keep the whole class in and it's recess, but it wasn't just you; They get at me for no reason, put
me on time out when someone tells on me and I hadn’t
done anything and the ‘dobbers’ were the ones who did it.
Children also mentioned their teachers giving smacks,
giving detention, making them ‘go on the sad step’,
giving them a ‘bad face’ beside their names, giving
yellow tickets, giving time-out, taking away fitness or
sport, keeping-in during play time, giving bad looks,
tearing up work, throwing work in the rubbish bin,
and sending to the principal. Linked to punishment
was the notion of humiliation. Ten per cent of
respondents mentioned this – being shown-up in front
of others, having incorrect work held up as an example
of what-not-to-do, being told they are the worst in the
class, being compared with others. However, despite
the images that all of this conjures up, 60 per cent of
the children in this study thought their teachers were
‘totally fair’.

Finally, children were asked what they believed they
had to do to please their teachers. Table 2 summarises
their responses.

**TABLE 2**

*What children say they have to do to please their teachers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be well-behaved/very good/nice</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do good/neat/correct work</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t talk without permission</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be obedient &amp; listen</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put your hand up/don’t talk while the teacher is talking</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other†</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* e.g. Sit up straight, sit cross-legged on the mat, walk quietly in the corridors, be co-operative, no fighting, give the teachers gifts.

Some comments were: They have to do good work, good
drawing, good writing and good behaviour and no swear
words – teachers don’t like swearing; Be good, don’t harass,
help others and learn the rule ‘No-one has the right to stop others from learning’; Sit up straight, cross your legs and
put your hands on your knees when you’re sitting on the
mat; Bring her flowers.

One male respondent commented: Boys don’t please
teachers very often. Everything we do annoys them. We talk
but girls talk more than us but they don’t get into trouble.

**Conclusion**

The evidence from this study suggests that most of the
children settled into school and liked it most of the
time, but issues pertinent to the affective domain were
very prevalent: friendships; kind teachers; collaboration
in play, sport and work; having choices; and being
affirmed by significant others. Punishment, bullying,
being made to sit and listen for too long, and
aggression, whether from other children or teachers,
were issues of concern. Not surprisingly, children’s
preferences for conditions at school were fundamentally
the same as adults would want in their work places.

While 68.3 per cent of the children in this study liked
school most of the time, 83 per cent said they did not
like ‘work’, defined as those things they are told to do,
that are boring, and in which they have no choice. This
‘work’ makes up the majority of a regular school day!
These young children, even in the early days of school,
felt disempowered, controlled by the threats of
punishment and the power of their teacher’s voice.
Their motivation was extrinsic, seeking affirmation
and tangible rewards from teachers. In particular, boys
appear to be unhappy early in their schooling
experience; strikingly gendered experiences and
attitudes have emerged in this study. Perhaps some
explanations for this can be found in studies relating
to different expectations of schooling held by boys and
girls (Nichols, 1995) or the ways in which classroom
practices reinforce or even constitute gendered
behaviours and attitudes (Kamler et al., 1994). If we
listen to the voices of the children, we can recognize
that we need to offer more responsive curricula that
build upon those experiences the children seem to
enjoy and value - greater opportunities for activity-
based learning, choice, interesting child-centred
curriculum, co-operative learning in a calm and happy
environment, and time for playing with friends. Haas
Dyson, (1993) argues that, when educators think
about young children’s schooling experiences, they
do so through the lens of their own teaching decisions.
Instead, they need to widen their lens to understand
and acknowledge what children value in their ‘outside
of school world’. They should then build upon these – the long-standing truism of both developmentally and culturally appropriate practice.

So, we advocate that the concerns of the children about their early experiences at school should be addressed by moving away from the discussion about children’s readiness for school to focus on schools’ readiness for children.

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References


Indigenous parents’ ratings of the importance of play, Indigenous games and language, and early childhood education

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Australian Indigenous children's participation in mainstream early childhood education has been markedly low when compared with non-Indigenous children. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Indigenous parents may not be sending their children to these programs because such programs are considered culturally inappropriate. The aim of the present study was to investigate Indigenous parents’ attitudes to Indigenous-specific early childhood programs. Eighteen parents whose children attended Indigenous-specific child care centres and playgroups completed a questionnaire that contained questions by which they evaluated the importance of early childhood education and other related cultural issues. Results of the parents’ evaluations indicate a high level of support for early childhood education in an Indigenous-specific context. It is suggested that aspects of Indigenous-specific programs may be usefully adopted in the development of more inclusive mainstream early childhood education programs.

It is often reported that attendance at preschool by children from Indigenous families is ‘sporadic and spasmodic’ (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000, p. 9). National reports of education, including education of Indigenous children, have consistently pointed to the fact that rates of participation by Indigenous children in all levels of mainstream education (preschool, primary and secondary) are increasing. Nonetheless, the number of those Indigenous children engaged in the mainstream education system is low relative to their proportion in the population (MCEETYA, 2001a & 2001b). Between 1995 and 2000, the rates of Indigenous children’s participation in preschool education were on average approximately 41 per cent, compared with 53 per cent for non-Indigenous children (DEST, 2000). This report also pointed to the need for preschool rates to be increased to improve the confidence and skills of Indigenous students in later schooling experiences (DEST, 2000). In Australian Indigenous communities, in particular, access to early childhood facilities has been lacking (Cadd, 2001). However, the reasons for this lack of participation and access by Indigenous children are poorly understood. Research is needed to improve our understanding of the contributing factors. Early childhood is a period recognised as one of rapid growth and development (Miller, 1993). During this period a child develops a range of skills, including physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills. Accordingly, early childhood education has focused on fostering those skills and developmental processes, as well as attempting to provide a productive environment that will support children’s development (KPV, 2002).
Children who miss out on the opportunity for early childhood education may be vulnerable to adverse developmental and educational outcomes. It has been suggested that this may be a factor contributing to many developmental and educational problems found within Indigenous communities (WEF, 2000). In recognition of this problem, a Commonwealth Government report advocated programs for increasing the participation levels of Indigenous children in mainstream preschool education (DEST, 2000). The programs developed to improve Indigenous children’s participation in early childhood education are exemplified by Victoria’s MACS (Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services). What impact these centres have had on Indigenous parents’ attitudes to early childhood education is of considerable interest.

**Indigenous families and early childhood education**

Despite the recognition that early childhood education provides an understanding of educational settings for children before they enter more formal schooling (WEF, 2000), Indigenous children have had limited access to such facilities because of a range of factors. An accumulation of anecdotal evidence from various reports indicates that, as with primary and secondary education, Indigenous families do not feel a sense of connection with educational facilities available to them (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000). This is comparable with studies of First Nations in the US. Machamer and Gruber (1998) argue that the differences between the culture of the First Nation students and the majority culture of the educational system has led to a disconnection and lack of commitment to the educational process by the students and their families. One program in Australia, conducted by the New South Wales Education Department, aimed to increase the participation of Indigenous children in early childhood education by providing alternatives to mainstream schooling. Indigenous families also gave their views on why mainstream schooling has been problematic (MCEETYA, 2001). Again, there was an emphasis on the lack of sensitivity and incorporation of Indigenous culture into the education program. In general, Indigenous parents had many negative experiences in relation to the structure, the content of programs, and the attitudes and approaches of staff involved in the mainstream early childhood education systems. Specifically, there was a near-absence of celebration of Indigenous heritage, lack of consideration by staff of various Indigenous issues, and, more broadly, a perceived discrimination against Indigenous families by the education system at large. When these experiences are combined with the dearth of Indigenous role models in all levels of teaching and, until quite recently, a lack of teaching of Indigenous languages and culture (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000), these factors may well explain why Indigenous children are not accessing early childhood education. Additionally, there are logistical issues associated with the participation of Indigenous children, such as limited access to transport. It is argued, therefore, that Indigenous parents are not motivated to encourage their children to participate in educational processes with which they feel no connection.

**Indigenous-specific preschool education programs**

In response to the unmet need of Indigenous families to access educational facilities that were inclusive of Indigenous culture, a range of services were developed. These services promoted early childhood education facilities specifically for the use of, and access by, Indigenous families. In particular, Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services (MACS) centres were set up across Australia. These centres were not merely set up as an Indigenous counterpart or equivalent to the mainstream childcare and early childhood facilities. MACS incorporate several community and Indigenous-specific issues in providing early childhood education and child care facilities for Indigenous children and their families. In particular, the MACS centres aim to provide the link for Indigenous children between home and community life, and subsequent formal education (MACS National Policy, 1992). MACS provide environments that aim to develop positive self-esteem, independence and responsibility by communicating to the children their Aboriginal identity and instilling pride in their Aboriginal heritage. Additionally, there is a recognition that families should be integral to the processes of early childhood education, and that MACS centres should have the capacity to work with the families to further
improve the children’s potential (Cadd, 2001). As well as responding to cultural issues, the practical issues of transportation to the early childhood facilities have also been alleviated to some extent by the MACS, as each centre coordinates a bus collection and drop-off service, that in some cases can cover hundreds of kilometres in a round trip.

The present study
The aim of the present study was to investigate the attitudes of a group of Indigenous parents whose children attended either a MACS, an Indigenous-specific kindergarten or an Indigenous-specific playgroup in urban or regional Victoria. In particular, it was of interest to see how importantly parents rated early childhood education and related topics, such as culturally-relevant activities, including Indigenous-specific play and maintenance of Indigenous languages with children. These topics were the focus of interest because much has been written about the need for practices in early childhood education that involve recognition and incorporation of Indigenous culture. The call for such programs, that might result in increased participation of Indigenous children, has been largely accommodated by facilities such as MACS. There is still a lack of data that might indicate whether these programs have had an effect on Indigenous parents’ views about early childhood education programs.

As such, the research questions concerned the importance Indigenous parents placed on early childhood education, as well as on cultural elements in the Indigenous-specific programs. The following questions were addressed:

1. How importantly do Indigenous parents rate early childhood education?
2. How importantly do they rate play, generally?
3. How importantly do they rate play with culturally-specific Indigenous content?
4. How importantly do they rate the maintenance of Indigenous languages?

Method
Participants
Participants were recruited from a number of Indigenous child care facilities, including MACS, Koori playgroups, and kindergartens. All liaisons with the participants were conducted through the staff at the facilities. Four out of the eight centres, preschools and playgroups approached deemed the project appropriate for parents’ participation. Across the participating centres, 40 per cent of the parents consented to participate in the project. There were 18 participants whose data were used in this component of the research: 14 mothers and four fathers (M=30.6 years, S.D. = 4.5 years).

In this research, Indigenous families were those who identified as such and were accepted by an Indigenous community in which they lived. This is compatible with the Federal Government’s legally acceptable definition (ABS, 2000). The locations of the communities of origin with which the participants identified ranged across several states: Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia. ‘No proof’ or identification of Aboriginality was required. Participants’ acceptance into Indigenous-specific child care facilities was evidence of community acceptance of the families as Indigenous. Furthermore, the participants self-identified as Indigenous through their participation in the project, which was presented as a study of parent-child play and language in Indigenous families. Approximately 70 per cent of the staff across the child care centres, playgroups and kindergarten were Indigenous, and 30 per cent non-Indigenous. Once consent was obtained, the questionnaire was sent home to the participating parents for them to complete and return at their leisure via the staff at the child care and playgroup facilities.

Parent questionnaire
The data for this research were obtained in conjunction with other data from a questionnaire consisting of 31 specifically developed questions. From those 31 questions, the responses to four are presented here. The parents’ opinion of the importance to their children of play, Indigenous play, Indigenous language, and early childhood education were measured. The questions asked were:
1. How important do you think play is for children?
2. How important do you think it is to keep up traditional games and toys and toy-making skills for Indigenous children?
3. How important is it to teach and speak traditional Indigenous language to Indigenous children?
4. How important is early childhood education (MACS, KECFOS, Koori playgroups, etc.)?

The 5-point Likert-type scale of potential responses ranged from Not Important (1), A Bit Important (2), Important (3), Very Important (4), to Totally Important (5). Overall, the questionnaire showed very good internal consistency ($\alpha = .78$).

The construct of a unique and culturally-specific Indigenous play compared with common forms of children’s play found across all cultures was broadly defined. As this study was exploratory, it was decided not to limit the responses of the participants to what constituted ‘Indigenous’ play. It was expected that, because of the urbanisation and physical separation of many Indigenous families from their culture of origin, interpretations of Indigenous play would be rich and varied. Consultation with Indigenous community groups, and study of anthropological and historical records and accounts of Indigenous games and play, revealed a rich and varied store of Indigenous games and toys. These range from, for example, arrangements of leaves to represent family and kinship groups and toys produced from natural materials (Haagen, 1994).

**Results**

From the responses of the 18 participants, it can be seen that there was generally a very high opinion of (a) the importance of play; (b) the importance of playing Indigenous games and maintaining Indigenous toy-making skills with their children; (c) the importance of teaching and speaking Indigenous languages with their children; and (d) the importance of early childhood education (ECE) as experienced through various Indigenous-specific childcare facilities. The majority of participants’ responses fell in the two highest categories, ‘Very Important (4)’ and ‘Totally Important (5)’.

![Figure 1. Percentage of responses for the importance of 'play'.](image-url)
Figure 2 illustrates the percentages for the responses of the participants in relation to the importance of Indigenous games for children. The majority (50%) of responses lay in the second-highest category, Very Important, followed by the highest category of Totally Important (33.3%), and the remaining responses (11.1%) were ranked as Important.

Figure 3 reports the percentages for the responses of the participants in relation to the importance of Indigenous language for children. Results for this question ranged along the scale. The highest percentage (44.4%) of responses lay in the highest category, Totally Important, followed by the second-highest category of Very Important (27.8%), followed by the third category, Important (16.7%), and the remaining responses (5.6%) were ranked in the second-lowest category, A Bit Important. Again, 5.6% of participants did not respond to this question.
FIGURE 4.
Percentage of responses for the importance of ‘early childhood education’

Discussion
These responses show that the Indigenous parents in this sample rated all four issues highly. However, in respect of teaching and speaking Indigenous languages to Indigenous children, more responses rated it as ‘important’ and one individual as a ‘bit important’. No parents indicated that early childhood education or any of the related cultural aspects was unimportant. These findings suggest that the parents of the children at the Indigenous-specific facilities were very satisfied with the MACS centres and, in particular, the cultural elements the MACS centres are promoting. The importance of early childhood education as experienced through the Indigenous-specific childcare centres and playgroups was the most highly ranked of all the questions. The MACS centres, in particular, have been aiming to incorporate Indigenous-specific culture into the educational content of the centres, as well as provide a bridge for children between home life and formal schooling. The maintenance of Indigenous-specific play, toy-making skills, and Indigenous languages with children were also rated highly. This would seem to indicate that parents placed a high value on the services available through the MACS centres and playgroups, as well as on the maintenance of Indigenous culture for their children.

The fact that one parent did not answer the question regarding the importance of teaching Indigenous-specific games and toy-making skills may be indicative of the vagueness of the question. Alternatively, it is also possible that the question was accidentally omitted by that parent. As mentioned previously, as this was an exploratory study, the questions regarding Indigenous culture were deliberately made general, so as not to appear to be limiting the responses of the parents. However, where the parents had an opportunity to detail their Indigenous play activities with their children they were often explicit about how they transmitted their specific cultural groups’ identity. For example, parents reported teaching their children how to use Indigenous objects such as boomerangs, the use of traditional instruments such as clapping sticks in conjunction with Midnight Oil rock music videos, participation in traditional dance classes, and going for walks in the bush which included teaching the children about bush tucker.

Figure 4 shows the percentages of the actual responses of the participants in relation to the importance of early childhood education as experienced in the various Indigenous-specific centres and programs. Of all the questions, this one received the highest results in terms of ranked importance. 77.8% of the responses held early childhood education to be Totally Important and the remaining percentage (22.2%) ranked it as Very Important.
In regard to teaching and speaking Indigenous language to Indigenous children, again, there may have been confusion over the definition of the term. There are traditional languages specific to various regions in Victoria, and Koori English, a Creole *lingua franca*, is spoken more widely across Victoria than are traditional languages (Enemburu, 1984). The question could easily have been interpreted either as ‘Is it important to teach the traditional languages of the Indigenous people to Indigenous children?’ or as ‘Is it important to teach Koori English, versus Standard English, to Indigenous children?’

**Conclusion**

Within a small sample of the current generation of parents whose children attend the Indigenous-specific child care facilities, Indigenous parents, in contrast to previous studies, placed strong emphasis on early childhood education, and the transmission of their culture through the maintenance of Indigenous-specific play and recreation, toy-making skills, and the use of Indigenous language. It remains now to investigate more closely the process of how Indigenous-specific facilities contribute to the formation of those attitudes, and what implications this may have for other mainstream preschools and other early childcare facilities in providing for the unique requirements of Indigenous communities. A preliminary interpretation of evidence supports the establishment of culturally-inclusive early childhood education programs in Victoria. It was also argued that such centres seem to improve Indigenous parents’ attitudes towards the value of early childhood education, when compared with anecdotal evidence of previous reports.

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Reframing the early childhood curriculum, by Jane Page, is an extraordinary publication. Not only does this author introduce the early childhood profession to futures education but she cogently argues for a way forward in moving us beyond traditional perspectives on early childhood curriculum.

Futures education is plural: it is about children taking charge of their possible futures. Through actively imagining and creating a range of futures in curriculum, children are not locked into a deterministic perspective but feel they can make a difference and are skilled to create a future they would want. In her comprehensive literature review, Page states (2000: 67) that futures education makes a contribution through:

- the development of a sense of agency in children;
- helping children to put their ideas into practice;
- helping children to feel that they are active participants in the learning programme and that they can exert some influence over it.

The publication’s chapters include: Children’s rights and adults’ responsibilities: reinterpreting educational ethics; Four-and five-year-old children’s understandings of time and the future; Futures studies: a catalyst for social and educational change; Applying futures concerns to the early childhood curriculum; and Early childhood professionals as agents of change.

Many of the chapters contain examples of Page’s own research to illustrate how children can be given a voice on values, ethics, and possible futures. In drawing upon the futures education literature and concepts of the Reggio writings (e.g. Malaguzzi), Page repositions young children as central to curriculum design and implementation in a way not seen before in Australia. This fresh new approach to early childhood curriculum gives readers much to think about, particularly in such globally troubling times. An analysis of internationalisation or an examination of the global community have so far not been considered in terms of early childhood education. Yet we know children express concern, fear, and a sense of powerlessness when they hear media reports on events which create insecurity for families. Page’s work encourages the early childhood teacher to build a place for children’s voices and a sense of taking charge of their futures…as evidenced by this five year old child:

‘I want to grow up and save the world’ (Page, 2000: 28)

Page’s work not only makes an original contribution to early childhood curriculum theorisation; she is the first author in futures education to make a significant early childhood curriculum contribution to that body of literature.

I commend this publication. It provides another way of giving voice to children and instilling a sense of agency.

Marilyn Fleer
Professor of Early Childhood Education
Monash University
The National Children's Services Forum was held in Canberra on the 15th and 16th of August, 2003. The NCSF aims to strengthen the sector as a whole by working collaboratively to advocate for high quality children's services, which meet the needs of all children and families.

**NCSF Members**

NCSF members include Early Childhood Australia (ECA) which auspices and chairs the NCSF, and national sector specific peak organisations such as the Australian Federation of Child Care Associations, the National Association of Community Based Children's Services, the National Family Day Care Council of Australia, the National Peak Ethnic Children’s Services Network and the National Alliance of Disability, Resource and Training Agencies.

Between them, these organisations represent all of the specific service types supported through the Federal Government's Children's Services Program.

**NCSF Objectives**

- To enable communication between members;
- To respond to issues of common interest and concern to members;
- To promote dialogue with government on an individual and collective basis;
- To promote a broader understanding of children's services and related issues across government and the community;
- To promote collaborative action amongst members while promoting and protecting the autonomy of member organisations.

**Issues Addressed at this year's NCSF included:**

- The Charities Bill 2003: Consultation on the Definition of a Charity
- The cost of insurance for service providers
- Future leaders: How to encourage the next generation of leaders in early childhood
- The Broadband Redevelopment
- The National Agenda for Early Childhood
- The concept of social inclusion and universality as a basis for an early childhood agenda

‘The NCSF continues to be a really significant forum for discussing the issues that matter to children and service providers.’

Pam Cahir, National Executive, Early Childhood Australia

For information updates see www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au or contact the National Secretariat on 1800 356 900
Learning at Home Series – This brand new series has been developed to provide additional support for carers, parents, grandparents and all who care for children in the home. Future editions will feature music, art, maths and science.

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