In this issue

Looking back: Children in detention in Australia

Lesbian mothers’ experiences of child care

Leadership-driven organisational change: A practical example of staff inclusion

Sociocultural reflections on Western child care

and more …
AJEC

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ONE OF THE EXCITING THINGS I have experienced in my years of working with young children and their families has been myriad opportunities to challenge my own beliefs and the way I think about the world. We know from a range of evidence (including basic learning theory in Piaget’s work, for example) that our beliefs influence how we interpret the world around us and how we then act in that world. For early childhood professionals this means that beliefs—about children, families, parenting, the role of women and mothers, our society, difference and a whole host of other things—impact on what they understand from their training, how they interpret that information and how they act upon it in their practice. As I have said numerous times in my own work, ‘what we believe is what we do’ (Sims, 1999).

Given this is the case, high-quality professionals (and in this term I include practitioners and academics) constantly open themselves to different viewpoints, seek ways to challenge their thinking, and reflect upon those challenges. One of the key roles of a professional journal, then, is to act as a conduit, a way people can share ideas that challenge the thinking of others in ways that will enhance the profession as a whole. AJEC has taken on this role for the early childhood profession in Australia, our colleagues in New Zealand, and increasingly in Asia. We want to present to you, our readers, challenging and exciting information and ideas that will get you thinking about what you do and why you do it. We want to play a role in your life-long learning in ways that enhance our profession and, ultimately, benefit the young children and their families to whom we are all responsible.

In this issue of AJEC, Brennan addresses the beliefs we share as members of a Western culture, particularly those beliefs that constrain our ability to offer high-quality programs to young children. She argues that the Western focus on individualism and the separation of children from mainstream adult life imposes restrictions on our ability to implement socioculturally based curricula. Given we currently believe high quality is closely associated with practice guidelines arising out of sociocultural theories, this is a matter of some tension for early childhood professionals. We need to accept the challenge to ponder on our understandings of ‘high quality’, as it is positioned in both theory and practice, with the aim of bringing our theories and our practices closer together.

Skattebol and Ferfolja present a powerful argument identifying the consequences for our profession when our values around inclusion, and the acceptance of those who are different, are not met in our practice. The authors discuss the experiences of eight lesbian mothers in relation to their young children’s early childhood experiences. Despite undertaking their research in a relatively ‘accepting’ community within a lesbian enclave, the mothers in this study experienced an Othering and an isolation that left them both feeling vulnerable and concerned for their children’s future. The mothers discussed their feelings of invisibility, as early childhood practitioners, despite knowing the family background, either ignored their status as couples, failed to provide resources reflecting their family structure and/or failed to modify their heteronormative behaviours. Many adults hold strong personal views on sexuality issues, particularly as these lead into different family forms. However, there is universal agreement that high-quality practice requires people to be valued as people. Basic human rights principles require us to validate children and their families for who they are and provide appropriate support, irrespective of our own beliefs about their differences. In their article, Skattebol and Ferfolja demonstrate that, for their participants, this is not occurring. We need to all accept the challenge to think about how we would deliver support to these families; and how we, in our practice today, ensure that no-one is feeling invisible, Othered or ignored.

Garvis and Austin provide us with another powerful example of how our beliefs about those who are ‘not us’ impact on practice. In this article the authors discuss children who were in detention centres in Australia prior to 2005. Many readers of AJEC were living and working in Australia when this practice was occurring, albeit not, in most cases, directly in front of us. We all knew that detaining children in what amounted to prisons was against basic principles of human rights. Many of us took part in actions that contributed to a developing groundswell of public opinion that ultimately resulted in the release of children from detention centres in July 2005. We all must take responsibility for challenging practices that are not of acceptable quality and working towards changing the belief systems from which these practices arise. The authors quote Archbishop Desmond Tutu who wrote (Castle, 2000, p. 4):
We can each make a difference if we are vigilant to create a new kind of society, more compassionate, more caring, more sharing where human rights, where children's rights are respected and protected. Politicians ultimately offer what the people want. Let us tell them we want peace and prosperity for everyone.

Of course parents themselves are influenced by the beliefs and values inherent in Western culture. Their decisions to access early childhood programs for their young children, and the types of programs they look for, are influenced by their own beliefs around what is important for young children. However influence rarely operates in one direction only. Noble shows that the parents in her study, while influenced by their social context, are also in a situation where pragmatic choices have to be made. The availability of services in itself influenced parents’ choice; issues such as co-location of children, affordability and demographic convenience all had roles to play in parents’ choices. This suggests that current usage patterns, for example, may not reflect what parents want (as they ought in a market-driven economy) but simply what is available.

In our services themselves, caregivers’ beliefs, and their enactment, create a community of practice where certain ways of thinking and behaving become the norm. Rivalland discusses the beliefs and practices of three early childhood professionals working at one childcare centre. All three caregivers ably used the official discourse, but this discourse was not necessarily evident in their practice. Beliefs were more likely to be enacted when they were shared with other caregivers, where the caregivers agreed on them and when they were connected to their intricate individual belief systems.

This raises the challenge of preparing professionals for employment in early childhood. How do we not only expose students to the official discourse, but ensure that connections are made to individual belief systems? How do we ensure that colleagues in the work environment will share similar beliefs to enhance the likelihood that official discourse (i.e. what we define as quality practice) will actually be enacted? Deakins uses action research methods to study a process of change used in one early childhood institution. He uses the learning organisation model proposed initially by Senge (1990), which argues that we need to learn together from our collective experiences within an organisation. He demonstrated changes in the mental models used by staff in the organisation, as well as in staff self-esteem and empowerment. These changes in staff beliefs and practices enabled the organisation to be more competitive through improvements in quality and responsiveness.

Part of the process used in learning organisations is that of supporting staff reflection. Reflection is a tool used in managing for quality in a number of areas, and individual staff in early childhood are encouraged to engage in self-reflection as part of their daily practice. Self-reflection helps professionals to probe their own mental models: to examine how mental models impact their perception of what is happening around them and how these shape their actions. Garbett and Tynan discuss a particular method of self-reflection: that of storytelling. They used this approach with professionals developing and teaching in an early childhood course in an attempt to understand both their own practices as teachers and learners, and their students’ experiences as learners. They found they gained through sharing their storytelling and interacting with each other as they reflected. However, this involved a considerable degree of trust that others were not always able to share.

Again, our colleagues from all over Australia and New Zealand have, through their writing, given us all a challenge to see things in a different way, to think about the things we thought we knew and reflect on how we can integrate these new ideas into our own models of the world. I hope you enjoy this issue of AJEC and I hope you find that the ideas presented here don’t leave you alone; that you find yourself musing over thoughts triggered by your reading and that, one day, you find some of these musings entrenched in your mental models and showing in your practice.

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Beyond child care—how else could we do this?
Sociocultural reflections on the structural and cultural arrangements of contemporary Western child care

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SOCIOCULTURAL THEORIES PROPOSE that social context and more experienced cultural members are integral to children’s development and enculturation into their communities. However, the argument is made that the current Western cultural and structural arrangement of group public child care impedes the successful implementation of sociocultural-based curricula because of its individualised and separatist nature. Furthermore, accepting this current cultural and structural arrangement at the theoretical level means that we lose sight of the fact that young children want to be part of adults’ lives and included in their communities. Separating young children and their teachers from adult communities also presents challenges for teachers when attempting to establish authentic relationships with young children and their families. The case is made that we need to reconceptualise theories to more closely align with contemporary enculturation practices and life situations if we are to reflect a truly sociocultural approach to teaching and learning.

Introduction

THiS PAPEr dRAwS ON observations and literature from my recent doctorate research, a qualitative case study. Using a sociocultural framework, and ethnographic methods of data collection, I explored how young children learn to be part of the group within a childcare setting. In this paper I share my reflections on public child care as a structural and cultural arrangement and comment on the difficulty for teachers when attempting to implement sociocultural-based curricula within this current arrangement.

Introducing the study

Lofland and Lofland (1995) maintain that in complex or differentiated societies people are enmeshed in devising and enacting ideas and activities that are responsive to their immediate needs. Deeply immersed in the participation of their own lives, they have little time to reflect on their life situations and become submerged in increasingly larger scales of social organisation. The aim of my study was to provide a window into everyday life in a childcare centre but also to enlarge perceptions of this social arrangement to encourage different ways of thinking about how we care for and work with young children. My study suggested that group child care, where large numbers of young children are cared for and educated in childcare centres which sit apart from adult communities, is only one of many possibilities for enculturing and educating young children.

My study contributed to many others which have drawn on a diverse body of sociocultural thinking to examine the micro nature and concerns of early childhood care and education. A sociocultural approach to learning in early childhood education has been advocated strongly in Australia and New Zealand and prompted many areas of research (Anning, Cullen & Fleer, 2004; Carr, 2001; Cullen, 1999, 2000; Fleer, 1992, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Jordan, 1999, 2003; Smith, 1996, 1998). Recent early childhood studies in New Zealand have included evaluation of the quality of child care, and investigation and critique of the early childhood curriculum (Cullen, 1996; Hedges, 2000; Nuttall, 2002; Podmore, May & Mara, 1998; Ritchie, 2003; Te One, 2003). Evaluative studies have included structural factors as indicators of quality child care (Smith, Grima, Gaffney, Powell, Masse & Barnett, 2000) while others have examined teaching practices and identity (Dalli, 2002; Farquhar, 2003; Nuttall, 2002, 2003) and investigated how management structures (McLeod, 2002) influence both children’s and teachers’ experiences. These studies describe, evaluate, compare and critique early childhood care and education as an existing social arrangement, yet the actual social-
structural arrangement of child care itself is seldom questioned or challenged. By implication, such studies reinforce rather than question the current structural and cultural caregiving arrangement, as research continues to be conducted within the ‘four walls’ of the childcare centre. However, Ratner (2000) and Valsiner (2001) ask whether an absence of serious consideration and critique of sociological, macro influences really constitutes sociocultural research.

Locating the study

A review of current literature and research examining the role and effects of child care in contemporary Western societies revealed many perspectives and insights into shared, public caregiving practices, yet I was unable to find studies that provided comment about the actual structural and cultural arrangement of child care itself. In preparation for this study I investigated the concept of socialisation from a range of perspectives. However, when I reviewed literature relating to child care as a socialising tool, I found a gap in the local and international literature, in spite of the fact that the effects of child care on children, teachers, and families is a well-documented area of research.

Child care as an institution

Institutionalisation has become a distinctive feature of modern childhood, and children today spend a considerable amount of time within the sphere of public socialisation (Sommer, 1992). As a consequence, childhood is now formed by two major divergent norm systems and child-rearing practices: on the one hand by the norms and traditions of the family, and on the other hand by the norms and child-rearing practices of professional educators (Dencik, 1989, 1995, 1998). However, Chaiklin (2001) states that there is very little research which attempts to better understand the complexities the parent or teacher encounters in selecting the socialisation procedures to attain the socially preferred end. These complexities are likely to be particularly acute where tradition no longer blindly dictates the approved techniques and where experts are often in disagreement, a situation exacerbated by a rapidly changing society in which the traditional primary socialising unit, the private family, is also changing (Chaiklin, 2001; Dencik, 1995, 1998; Sommer, 1992).

Contemporary group care arrangements for young children have made socialisation a public rather than private social practice. In addition, private family practices have been exposed in the public arena through young children’s daily attendance at day care centres. Teachers are privy to many aspects of family life that in earlier eras would have remained private knowledge. Dencik (1998) argues that modernisation is strengthening the tendencies towards individuation, yet notes that this is balanced by a contrasting observation. The more the child is individualised through the modernisation process, the more intensely he or she seeks out social belonging. Moreover, the ‘longing to belong’ is a neglected phenomenon in modern child research (Dencik, 1989, 1995). Western research has only recently adopted the sociocultural perspective that the person is formed as an individual through the social group, a circumstance commonly expressed by individuals as a desire for group membership. This desire for membership and ‘to belong’ captured a key theme arising from my data.

Child care is a societal institution that separates children from adult sociocultural communities through this organisation of the centre’s physical and social space. Lofland and Lofland (1995) argue that, when we review the different institutions in Western society, we often find that their encompassing or total character is symbolised by the physical barrier to social interaction with the outside and this is often built right into the physical setting. Young children and their caregivers in group care situations are physically separated from adult social activities, and this is encapsulated in both the cultural and social arrangements of the childcare centre.

Separation from adult communities

Rogoff (2003) proposes that one of the most powerful variations in children’s lives in different cultural communities is the extent to which they are allowed to participate in and observe adult activities. Variations in children’s opportunities to learn from ongoing mature activities relate closely to many other differences in cultural patterns of child rearing (Rogoff, 1990). Segregation of children from mature community activities, as seen with childcare institutions, is taken for granted in middle-class settings, but it is rare in many other communities. Rogoff (2003) maintains that today most children and youth in contemporary Western societies have very limited opportunities to witness adult work, let alone contribute to their families and communities (Morelli, Rogoff & Angelillo, 2003).

Jordan (2003) acknowledges the impact of such separation and argues that, as early childhood centres play a major role in preparing children for their roles in society, it is difficult to justify the cultural and social organisation of these institutions. She makes the important point that children in child care spend large parts of their days divorced from the ‘real world’ yet are expected to learn to use the tools of their cultures. Jordan contends that it is the teachers’ responsibility to act as mediators for children of cultural understandings, on the basis that they are the ‘senior semioticians’ (Vygotsky, 1934/1986) in this cultural arrangement. Yet I see the divorced nature of early childhood centres
from adult communities as disadvantaged teachers and children alike. The social arrangement of child care actually prevents both parties from engaging in authentic cultural life.

What do sociocultural theories tell us about how to do child care?

As an aside, I would argue that an anomaly exists between the promotion of sociocultural theories as guiding frameworks for practice and the realities of what can be achieved in early childhood education and care practice. Sociocultural theories propose that context is central and relationships and social others, especially more experienced cultural members, are integral to children's development and enculturation into their communities (Fleer, 1995, 2003; Göncü, 1999; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Moll, 1990; Nicolopoulou & Cole, 1993; Rogoff, 1995, 1998; Stone, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978a, 1978b). Yet young children are cared for in environments that, by their very physical structure, suggest that children need separate and special attention apart from adult activities (Denck, 1989, 1998; Sommer, 1992). The theoretical gaze in New Zealand appears to be 'sociocultural', but early childhood care and education practices remain individualised and separatist because of the cultural and social organisation of childcare centres. Initially I tried to ignore this anomaly but came to realise that this tension between theory and practice suggested the need for an interruption and critique of contemporary, Western childcare practices.

To elaborate on this point, sociocultural theories hold that psychological phenomena are formed as people engage in collective, socially organised activity (Leont'ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978a). This implies that serious attention must be paid to the concrete social structures in which people (both children and adults) develop (Ratner, 2002; Tolman, 2001). We are currently in a historical situation with new possibilities for diverse socialisation practices, but at the same time are living in culturally diffuse times that create ambivalence about how to enculturate young children (Sommer, 1992). Child care is an institution that is part of, but also reflects, the larger social system; and any proposal for reconceptualisation would also have to examine the economic, political, historical, social and cultural factors that influence this institution (Ratner, 1997, 2002).

A difficult task for teachers

To recap, a review of recent research in New Zealand has identified a gap between the rhetoric of sociocultural theories propelling early childhood care and education practices, and what is possible within the structural and cultural arrangement of group child care. This gap has led me to ask how teachers in childcare settings enculturate children within an environment that separates both children and teachers from the wider community. I propose that this is a difficult task for teachers who are attempting to abide by sociocultural understandings of learning and development that emphasise the importance of cultural and social embeddedness. Furthermore, governmental visions articulated in the Strategic Plan see early childhood education and care being promoted as sociocultural in its approach, as receiving increased political and social attention (Ministry of Education, 2002). Yet early childhood policy and governmental vision has lofty aims:

The early years of a child's learning will make a significant difference to the way they develop and go on to learn throughout their lives. Getting it right at this vital stage will build lifelong foundations of success not only for children but also for New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 1).

Key themes arising from my data

Two interdependent and recurring themes appeared throughout my data. The first was the importance of the relationship between teachers and children, while the second concerned children's desire for group and social arrangement of children and teachers from the wider communities, the children in my study demonstrated spontaneous and frequent attempts to reconnect with adults and their lives, and also with the wider social and historical community.

Connecting with teachers’ lives

The following interaction is representative of many similar child-initiated conversations. Jacob's tenacious and focused questioning allowed him to delve into Elizabeth's (teacher) personal relationships.

It is rest time and Jacob is seated in the home corner with Elizabeth (teacher). He asks her for a story. Elizabeth begins to read a book and Jacob immediately responds with, 'No ... no ... I mean a story about you. No, tell me a story about you.' Elizabeth proceeds to tell Jacob about her family, her interests, her age, her home life, and so on. Jacob is engaged and interested. He urges her to tell him 'more and more'. While Elizabeth talks, he stops her frequently to ask questions like, 'How old is your best friend? How old is your dad's girl friend?' Melissa (teacher) joins the children and announces that, when it is a bit quieter, Jacob can choose the tape to listen to during rest time. In spite of this promise, Jacob urges Elizabeth to continue with her story, although he now asks his questions in hushed tones. (PH2 Day 6 p23 103-105) (Phase 2 of the data collection, Day 6, p. 23 of observational notes, lines 103-105).
Leont’ev (1978, p. 51) argues that ‘...under whatever kind of conditions and forms human activity takes place, whatever kind of structure it assumes, it cannot be considered as isolated from social relations or from the life of society.’ The distinctness of human activity of the human individual is represented in the system of relationships of society. Leont’ev adds that outside of relationships human activity simply ceases to exist. The key function of Jacob's questioning was to access personal information about his teacher which no doubt strengthened their relationship, yet at a broader level he was also exploring others’ family structures and the mechanisms structuring these relationships. This knowledge would assist his ongoing enculturation into institutional and societal culture.

Connecting with others’ families

Children also elicited information from parents at the centre. In this situation Tama and Michael used Paul's father as informant to find out how things were done at their house.


Connecting with contemporary culture

While in this situation, Jacob appeared intrigued by an older child’s knowledge of contemporary culture.

At one of the lunch tables the children are discussing movies. The children discuss movie characters and the movies they have seen. Jacob [seated at the other table] turns around so that he can listen in. His eyes widen and he strains to hear what is being said. Jacob picks up his chair and positions it so that he has his back to the children seated at his table but can see Zane, the main contributor and also instigator of the conversation. Zane is seven years old and visiting the centre. Jacob begins a barrage of questions, asking Zane about a movie character. Donna [teacher] attempts to get both boys back on task and calls out, ‘Now who is still eating? Who needs to eat the rest of their dinner?’ Zane ignores her questions and continues the discussion spurred on by Jacob’s interest and undivided attention. (PH2 Day 3 p8 83-89)

Throughout this conversation Jacob demonstrated an interest and enthusiasm that was unusual for him, based on my many former observations of his interactions during lunchtime. Seven-year-old Zane presented as a rather sophisticated contributor in this early childhood setting, and Jacob was immediately attracted to this more-experienced peer. Interestingly, the teacher responded to Zane's topic of conversation (popular culture) and Jacob’s fascination by attempting to contain it, and tried to return the two boys to the task at hand.

Connecting with adults’ work

Children were drawn to visitors such as Zane who brought with them glimpses of life outside the centre. In this example Tama and Rebecca were fascinated by my clothing and noticed that I dressed differently from the early childhood teachers.

Tama runs over to me and exclaims excitedly, ‘I saw you yesterday but in different clothes.’ Tama and Rebecca discuss the skirt I am wearing, commenting in detail on its length, design, texture, shape and colour. The two girls finger the fabric then, Tama says, ‘My mummy has black stockings like you.’ She strokes my stockings, leans against my arms, sucks her fingers on one hand and plays with her hair with the other. She relaxes into my body and closes her eyes. (PH2 Day 5 p14 1-16)

Clothes are artefacts in that they embody cultural codes regarding roles in society. As I collected data during my lunch hour I would arrive at the centre dressed in my ‘work clothes’. The girls discerned that my clothes were different from the teachers’ yet similar to their own mothers’ working clothes. Their observations suggested that they were learning to distinguish between social roles and the associated dress codes. When Tama observed that my stockings were like her mother’s, she leaned contentedly against me (an unusual gesture for Tama). I was touched by this action and the obvious feelings the similarity between my clothes and her mother’s evoked in her.

Implications of my study’s findings

Keeping in mind the importance of relational aspects of enculturation, children’s constant yearning to be part of adults’ authentic lives led me to reflect upon the implications of a socialising institution that separates children and their teachers from the wider community. Guided by sociocultural theories I concluded that community care arrangements contain the potential for children to contribute to their own learning opportunities, yet child care more often than not involves children’s social and cultural segregation from the mature activities of their communities. Furthermore, when young children cannot enter community activities, adults are required to design specialised child-focused settings (Morelli, Rogoff & Angelillo, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). Yet I repeatedly
found that children attended most closely to events and conversations that were not designed specifically for their participation, and I was unable to reconcile child-focused settings and activities with this observation. Nor was I able to reconcile current socioculturally based models of learning which emphasise the importance of collaborative participation in communities with the segregated nature of childcare centres.

Learning by just being there involves picking up values, skills and mannerisms in an incidental fashion through close involvement with a socialising agent and cultural models of learning (Azuma, 1994). Ward (1971) describes this as the silent absorption of children into community life through the natural participation in its daily rituals and tasks. Yet this requires children’s access to involvement in community activities, and access is dictated by the extent to which caregivers organise specialised child-focused activities or expect children to learn from intentional participation in ongoing shared endeavours. In communities where children have access to aspects of adult life they learn from opportunities to observe, and in fact adults expect young children to learn through watching (Morelli, Rogoff & Angellillo, 2003; Rogoff, 1981). In these contexts children are given responsibility for managing their own attention, motivation and involvement in learning through observation and participation in ongoing mature, adult activities.

In some communities, children’s learning involves ‘intent participation’ in almost the full range of activities of their communities, with keen observation, initiative and responsive assistance (Rogoff, 2003). Children are able to observe and listen to the ongoing processes of life and death, work and play—authentic cultural events of their communities. In these societies children are legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the mature activities of their community, watching what is going on and becoming increasingly involved. Learning occurs as an outcome of children just being with adults while they undertake community tasks and activities.

The significance of collaborative learning has been highlighted in concepts such as ‘communities of learning’ (Palincsar, Brown & Campione, 1993); ‘communities of inquiry’ (Lindfors, 1999; Wells, 1995, 1996); ‘communities of understanding’ (Anning & Edwards, 1999); and ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998). Jordan (2003) notes that each concept emphasises a particular aspect, yet all the models promote learning and inculcation into culture as the outcome of members’ involvement in their communities (Rogoff, 1998). Wenger’s ‘community of practice’ in particular cites learning as the outcome of ‘...people interacting with each other in a variety of pursuits, tuning relations with each other and with the world’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 86), while Wells’ (1995) ‘community of inquirers’ emphasises the importance of members engaging in authentic learning. What happens, however, when communities do not support all of its members to participate in collaborative, authentic learning situations?

### Children want to be with adults

Children did not want to be excluded from the adult world, and the centre’s separation from wider community activities presented challenges for the teachers attempting to establish authentic relationships with large numbers of children and their families. Teachers were faced with the task of forming a community with large groups of children, and this complex network of relationships had little in common with mother–child dyads mainly studied by researchers (Singer, 1996). Furthermore, my study supported Singer’s findings when she discovered the exact opposite to what is generally accepted in developmental psychology. Children do not require or desire exclusive attention. Children want a feeling of togetherness and to connect with more-experienced cultural members of the community, and this is evidenced by their ongoing interest in the life and work of adults (Beach, 1988; Rheingold, 1982). My study supported and provided many examples of this phenomenon, seen initially in children’s intense curiosity about teachers’ personal lives but also in their need to discuss and understand significant life events such as illness, mortality and tragedy.

### Finding support in sociocultural approaches

Sociocultural and activity theories with their roots in Marxist ideologies offer an explanation for children’s interest in adult lives. Marx (1983) argued that when individuals (children) are alienated from labour (or work) they are also alienated from each other, and deprived of the enjoyment of meeting their own subsistence needs (Elhammoumi, 2001). Rogoff (1990) maintains that, in societies where children are integrated in adult activities, children are situated within the community as central to the action. They observe what takes place and interact with real community experiences occurring within the daily life of the ‘adult world’. In these communities there is no need for child-focused activities, as children are always meaningfully engaged. I also found that children were most interested in events and activities that were not designed specifically for their instruction, and in adult conversations in which they were not directly addressed or included. Azuma (1994) terms this form of learning osmosis, as learning occurs in an incidental but highly effective fashion. Azuma found that children picked up cultural values, skills and mannerisms through simply being with adults, which provided them with an unintended cultural model of learning.

Cannella (1997) argues that notions of early childhood professionalism exclude children from the world of those who are older, and claims we have taught children
to stay away from ‘adult’ conversations and activity. She argues that, ‘Professional discourse silences children as it is used to create a “pretend” world for them, a world that has nothing to do with their real lives’ (p. 152). As my study progressed I asked, ‘How do young children respond to this situation?'; ‘How do teachers socialise and enculturate children in a separatist setting?’

Insights into the socialisation process

A significant insight was that enculturation occurred during ‘authentic moments’ or at times when children and teachers were engaged in ‘real life’ interactions and conversations. These moments were often teachers’ spontaneous responses to children’s interests or needs and, although brief, acted as ‘connectors’ that linked the child with the teacher and also the group. Furthermore, I observed that teachers were most involved, the group most involved, and the teaching seemingly effortless during these moments. More often than not it was children who initiated authentic links with teachers and parents (when available). My observation of this phenomenon is supported by others’ research (see Rogoff’s and Singer’s work) who have found that effective and apparently effortless enculturation occurs as an incidental outcome of children participating with adults in community life. I learned most about the individual–socal relation of children partcipating wth adults n communty lfe.

As I write my final conclusions and discuss the implications of my findings, I remain cautious about offering critique that calls into question the newly acquired rights of young children and their teachers, for I recognise that early childhood discourses and practices have evolved in response to specific social and historcal circumstances. In this I agree with Jackson’s (1993) claim that it would be ironic if we dispensed with the notion of the special status of the child as reactionary cultural baggage just at the very moment that women and young children are beginning to acquire some hard-won rights (May, 2003). I understand that, in order to protect and emphasise the specific qualities and needs of young children, we separate this age group from others to signify they deserve our special attention. Nevertheless, this study has left me questioning the cost of beliefs and discourse that award young children special rights and status yet perpetuate practices that position young children and their teachers as apart from their social communities. Wenger (1998) remarks us that we must remain reflective about our discourses, so I return to the sociocultural theories underpinning this study to deconstruct aspects of the social and cultural arrangement of caregiving practices and conclude by offering an alternative conceptualisation of young children and their teachers.

Implications for teachers

My observations led me to agree with contemporary socioculturalsts who argue that our tradtonal ways of thinking about socialisation are inadequate and we have no new theoretical concept to grasp the meaning of families and children (and I would add early childhood teachers) in a changing society (Dencik, 1989; Rogoff, 2003; Singer, 1996; Sommer, 1992). In this regard, I see early childhood teachers as struggling to cope with a cultural lag as they attempt to use sociocultural understandings as the basis of their caregiving and teaching practices, yet the structural arrangement of public child care impedes the successful implementation of sociocultural-based curricula.

I would also propose that the early childhood community at large has taken a certain amount of ‘theoretical licence’ in adopting sociocultural concepts and making them ‘fit’ their own situations and settings. This was a concern articulated by Cullen (1996) when Te Whāriki, the New Zealand national early childhood curriculum (founded on sociocultural principles of learning and development), first emerged as a guiding curriculum document for early childhood education in New Zealand. Cullen supported the sociocultural underpinnings of this document yet queried teachers’ ability to grasp complex theoretical concepts and apply them to teaching practices. More recently Cullen and others have expressed similar concerns in relation to early childhood assessment practices in New Zealand. They write:


I support Cullen’s concern with regard to teachers’ lack of theoretical understanding, yet would add that the working conditions of early childhood teachers—in terms of their isolation from adult communities and the structural arrangements of group childcare practices—need to be considered in regard to their ability (or inability) to successfully implement sociocultural-based curricula.

Sociocultural approaches promote cultural, social and historcal embeddedness, yet in applying such approaches to early childhood practice and research we separate rather than embed children and their teachers, at the personal, community and institutional levels (Wenger, 1998). My concern is that we are
setting teachers an impossible task when asking them to enculturate children into society using a theoretical approach that promotes community connectedness and involvement, yet the act of group care itself separates teachers from their own communities. I question the authenticity of group care situations and believe the physical structure results in a rather contrived social situation that teaches children how to survive child care but may have little to do with other aspects of their cultural life. At its worst this separation or dislocation breeds a type of ‘centre neurosis’ or malaise in teachers and parents who are required to feign interest or enthusiasm in a void of stimulation, and in an environment that fails to ignite their own interests or meet their need for companionship and connectedness to other adults. As for children, at its worst child care is an institution that enculturates them into a sterile world that bears little relationship to their own or others’ ‘real lives’.

Reconceptualising early childhood practice, research and theories

Much has been written about the notion of ‘child embeddedness’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Donaldson, 1978, 1992) to encourage a conceptualisation of children as nested within social and cultural contexts, and as unable to be divorced from micro and macro social relationships. I propose that we now need to conceptualise teachers and caregivers in a similar fashion and develop thinking around ‘teacher/caregiver embeddedness’.

Teacher embeddedness

Conceptualising teachers as embedded in their communities and creating a discourse of ‘teacher embeddedness’ will help to address Leavitt’s (1994) concerns that teachers are exhausted by the isolation and constant demands of caregiving, and this impacts upon the quality of their relationships with children. Furthermore, my study has found that enculturation relies upon teachers’ ability to respond emotionally to children, and to appropriate cultural tools and practices in a way that connects children to their social and cultural contexts. Yet teachers are constantly challenged by this task in a child-centred world. Fleer (2001a, p. 11) asks if our reified and ‘…very precious ideals have masked their culture-specific beginnings?’ And challenges us to reify new cultural tools so that we can think differently and change our ‘community of practice’.

Child connectedness

Just as discourses such as ‘child-centredness’ and ‘child embeddedness’ have evolved in response to time and need, we now need a new way of thinking about child care and early childhood education. It is time to reconnect children and, most importantly, teachers with their wider communities and recognise that ‘children-and-teachers’ are a joint unit that cannot be separated from wider society. To do so is to acknowledge both children’s and teachers’ need for inclusion in adult communities. This conceptualisation of ‘connectedness’ recognises and understands young children as cultural members in their own right, which means they are not only merely included but are in active relationship with society (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2002).

My study highlighted the integral contribution of teachers to young children’s enculturation, and learning and development, which is wholly congruent with sociocultural understandings of the importance of the contribution of more-experienced cultural members, and the organisation of social environments. I am at a loss then to explain why we have failed to pay the same attention to teachers’ interests, abilities and states of mind as we have to children’s, especially when each is contingent upon the other.

Implications for early childhood practice

In New Zealand we have recognised the centrality of relationships within the early childhood education and care centre; that is, between child and teacher, parent and teacher, teacher and teacher (Ministry of Education, 2004) but have been much slower to acknowledge the relationship between early childhood centres as institutions and the wider community. Fleer (2001a) argues that a change in thinking must take place to ensure that we no longer reproduce ourselves in the next generation of teachers, but rather speak openly about the cultural tools and models we are using. Only then will we move ‘…beyond social reproduction’ and progress practice reified in outdated early childhood discourse (p. 11). For at present ‘…we have failed to do sufficient justice to the complexity of the times in which we live, the changes occurring in the world and their implications for early childhood and its institutions’ (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2002, p. 10).

Endnotes

The author’s thesis, ‘They just want to be with us.’ Young children: Learning to live the culture. A post-Vygotskian analysis of young children’s enculturation into a childcare setting, is available from the Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington, New Zealand.

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References


Voices from an enclave
Lesbian mothers’ experiences of child care

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In this paper we examine eight lesbian mothers’ experiences and perceptions of their young children’s early childhood education. These mothers identified the (in)visibility of their lesbian identities and families and the narrow definition of family in early childhood settings as significant issues in their experiences as childcare users. This paper traces these issues to the normative ideas of, and superficial engagement with, families in early childhood curriculum, pedagogy, practices and procedures.

The childcare settings used by these families were situated in a relatively ‘accepting’ community within a lesbian enclave in inner-city Sydney. Yet even here the mothers were required to undertake complex negotiations about the way the setting catered to their family constellation in the everyday practices. We argue that early childhood educators could better support this group through more active engagement in representing a broad range of differences, including those relating to sexuality. Furthermore, educators can create richer opportunities for connections and community between families when they focus on the everyday functions of families rather than an exclusive focus on family structures.

Introduction

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade is renowned for political, irreverent humour and artistry. In 2001 the parade began with pelicans with prams to the music of ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’. A semi-trailer-sized ‘Aussie backyard’, complete with Hills hoist and barbecue, followed. Costumed children of all ages, pregnant women, and men dressed in glittering pink tutus, femmes in cowboy pants, toy boys as ‘Xena’, and ‘daddies as daddies’ played on this float to disrupt normalised suburban images of family life. This was followed by hundreds of colour-coded families with prams, bikes and skateboards which gave substance to and embodied these reworked symbols of proliferation. A small and dedicated group of early childhood practitioners came after this unruly rainbow, enthusiastically supporting this community by participating in an event that celebrates the sexual diversity of individuals, families and relationships.

Children have always been a part of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) communities and certainly are always present in Mardi Gras parades. However, 2001 was the first time LGBTQ-headed families were publicly forefronted and celebrated. The sheer scale was a visual shout, an affirmation of the rainbow baby boom, an acknowledgment that ‘gaybies’ (Ryan & Martin, 2000) are on the increase. This float marked a cultural shift in LGBTQ communities, a coming of age where increasing numbers imagine parenting children as part of their life trajectory. Undoubtedly for many in the queer community, that small band of early childhood professionals publicly marching in the parade signalled hope of increased visibility and inclusion of sexual and family diversity in education.

In this paper we draw on a series of interviews with eight lesbian mothers to trace their experiences and perceptions of early childhood education. The research participants focused primarily on the issue of the visibility of their family in curriculum and setting procedures. These families used two service types: family day care and accredited long day care settings. Where the differences are relevant to our discussion we will name the service type, but will otherwise refer to ‘settings’. The findings offer some practical directions for practitioners that support their efforts to address the needs of this community.

At this point, however, it is crucial to point out that we undertook this research within a specific geographical zone of Sydney that has a high number of LGBTQ-headed households. This zone is within a broader countercultural milieu that enables an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) that is not only lesbian but also ‘lesbian friendly’. 
Thus we are offering an analysis of the childcare experiences of some lesbian-headed families within a relatively ‘accepting’ community context.

The state of play for gay and lesbian sexualities

‘Acceptance’ of lesbian-headed households at a local community level, however, must be understood within its broader social context. The lesbian and gay baby boom accompanies a resurgence of powerful sociocultural and political discourses of resistance to non-heterosexual and queer sexualities and family types in both the Australian and international arenas. Increasingly, the current Australian government reflects neo-liberal, neo-conservative fundamentalist rhetoric in its policy directions. Over the past five years there have been several inflammatory public debates over lesbian and gay rights. For example, when babies led the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in 2001, the Federal Government was trying to amend the Sex Discrimination Act (1984) to enable state governments to discriminate against lesbians and single heterosexual women in the provision of fertility services (Milbank, 2003). While this move was unsuccessful, it was a direct attack on the fertility rights of lesbians and single women. Then, prior to the 2004 Australian Federal election, the current prime minister publicly supported the exclusion of lesbian and gay people from marriage, claiming it was a sanctified union between two people of the opposite sex.

Another public onslaught on non-heterosexuals’ rights followed soon after. Play School, a high-quality early childhood program (produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation), depicted a one-minute segment of a young girl with her two mothers at a fun park with a friend. The episode resulted in a media frenzy. Numerous politicians smelled a public platform for wedge politics and political expediency and used it to fuel the media hysteria to marginalise lesbian and gay families (Ferfolja, 2006). The Minister for Children claimed that Play School had ‘been an excellent program but I wouldn’t like to see it become politically correct’ (Krien, 2004), and the acting prime minister described it as ‘putting the indulgences and the particular wheelbarrows of adults before children’ (Wroe, 2004). The right to representation for children from lesbian- and gay-headed households was sidelined in the debate.

Thus, despite an apparent acceptance of diversity in the lesbian and gay enclave of Sydney, the maintenance of lesbian and gay rights, which have been historically hard won, remain tenuous at best in the current conservative political climate (Ferfolja, 2006). Such public ‘debates’ significantly impact on homophobic attitudes in the broader community and create a climate of insecurity for LGBTQ people. Social and political regulation has long been a feature in the lives of non-heterosexuals (Foucault, 1978). This regulation is based on heteronormative beliefs which posit a set of fixed and immutable connections between limited and constrained conceptions of biological sex, gender and (hetero)sexuality (Butler, 1990, 1993). The conceptual framework that underpins heteronormative values refuses any physiological variation in biological sex, gendered performance and, ultimately, the possibility of non-heterosexual orientations. These orientations are not only possible but are the fabric of the child-rearing environments of many children in lesbian- and/or gay-headed families.

Unfortunately, there is not a strong research base to support educators in their work with these issues. Much of the policy and research on gay- and lesbian-headed families presumes that lesbian and gay parenting is questionable, problematic and/or harmful (Milbank, 2003). The research has largely sought to compare whether lesbian/gay parenting/families are ‘as good’ as heterosexual families. There is a strong focus on whether children from these families meet social, psychological and/or sexual norms (Allen & Burrell, 1996; Chan, Raboy & Patterson 1998; Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Patterson, 1995; Patterson & Chan, 1999). Many studies focus on the potential ‘atypical gender identities’ and ‘atypical gender roles’ of children raised in lesbian-headed households, with particular emphasis on the masculinisation of male children and the feminisation of female children (Ryan & Martin, 2000). Heteronormative assumptions dominate these studies which revolve around beliefs that boys and girls are rendered deviant in families structured differently from the heterosexual norm.

However, in spite of the normative assumptions in the research base, this body of research actually indicates no adverse effects of being raised in non-normative households. In her review of the literature, Milbank (2003, p. 18) concludes:

There is now a wealth of credible data that demonstrates lesbian- and gay-headed families are ‘like’ heterosexual parents in that their children do not demonstrate any important differences in development, happiness, peer relations or adjustment ... It is family process and not family structures that are determinative of children's well being. The number of adults and the sex of the adults in a household has no significant bearing on children's well being.

There is a strong need for new research that moves beyond heteronormative assumptions and investigates how heteronormativity impacts on the life experiences of children from LGBTQ-headed families and how this might be effectively addressed. There are few studies
that address issues faced by lesbian and gay parents/family constellations in relation to their access to, and satisfaction and experiences with, social and educational services for their children. Certainly, the small body of educational research that deals with this topic suggests that entry into the educational field is difficult for non-normative families. Savage (2002) reported her experiences of trepidation and the perceived need for careful negotiations with her children's educational institutions. Others have suggested that gay and lesbian parents commonly experience fear that their children will experience discrimination as a result of their parents’ sexuality (Mercier & Harold, 2003; Ray & Gregory, 2001). These fears are not unfounded, as few schooling systems ‘have the information, experience, comfort level, or even willingness to address the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-parented families’ (Ryan & Martin, 2000, p. 207).

There is a small body of work written about the experiences of lesbian-headed families within the early childhood sector in Australia (Andrew et al., 2001) and internationally (Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999a, 1999b; Casper, 2003; Casper & Schultz, 1999). Virginia Casper’s (2003) work is particularly relevant to the experiences of families. She discusses the protective strategies that gay and lesbian people use to combat homophobia and how these strategies are difficult to maintain in a parenting context. Furthermore, she illustrates how the experiences of children raised in non-heteronormative contexts offer significant challenges to the gendered assumptions of child development theory. This paper extends this literature, drawing on the perspectives of Australian lesbian mothers and their experiences with early childhood settings.

**Methodology**

We undertook qualitative interviews with eight women who self-identified as lesbian. These participants were located through ‘snowballing’, a technique frequently applied to research considered sensitive in nature (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Lesbian parents not only potentially jeopardise themselves through their participation in social research, they also may feel that participation increases the vulnerability of their child. Therefore, in keeping with the tenets of feminist research and to protect the anonymity of all participants, no continuous narratives have been used and pseudonyms have replaced individuals’ names.

The participants all resided in a specific region of Sydney known for its lesbian community; this is spatially concentrated and quasi-underground and is visible to those ‘in the know’ (Bell & Valentine, 1995). The specificity of this neighbourhood means that the experiences identified in this paper are not representative of other sexually diverse communities or individuals even within the bounds of Sydney. It does, however, offer insight into early childhood practices within relatively open-minded communities.

The interviewees were all educated women from middle-class, Anglo-Celtic, English-speaking backgrounds, who were aware of, and could freely articulate, the theoretical and practical issues associated with diversity and discrimination. Each woman self-identified as lesbian and, at the time of the research, was in a long-term lesbian partnership. Each couple had one child, with the children’s ages ranging from seven months to three years. The findings reported here are thus focused on initial experiences of using children’s services.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour. The semi-structured approach employed enabled the exchange to remain focused but also allowed unexpected and useful lines of inquiry to be pursued. The interviews were taped with the permission of the participants, and transcribed by the authors to ensure confidentiality and close analysis. They were coded for emerging themes and a discursive analysis was undertaken (Burr, 1995). The following sections highlight the discourses arising from these interviews, providing a critical discussion and analysis.

**Discussion**

**Invisibility and visibility: Processes of disclosure**

One of the interesting features of the *Play School* debate mentioned earlier is that the first time the ‘two mums’ episode was screened, no-one seemed to notice it. The episode’s peaceful passage across the airwaves suggests that for many viewers a same-sex family is unthinkable; it is simply read as something else. The initial invisibility of lesbian mothers on *Play School* resonates with our participants’ experiences as mothers. Articulating one’s non-heterosexuality is not always immediately understood within heteronormative contexts, as heterosexuality is assumed (Rich, 1980/1993).

This is in part related to the way motherhood is constructed. Motherhood is assumed to be heterosexual through biological understandings of conception requiring sexual intercourse between two people of the opposite sex. From this perspective, once the utilitarian reproductive act is completed the woman becomes a ‘mother’ and moves into a new realm of subjectivity. Dominant discourses of motherhood position sexuality and motherhood as mutually exclusive; mothers are constructed as non-sexual beings, devoted to their offspring. As lesbians are labelled by their sexuality, and discursively positioned as deviant, highly sexualised subjects (Ryan & Martin, 2000), thus the idea of ‘lesbian mothers’ is an oxymoron in heteronormative thinking.
This conceptual process of ‘filling in the heterosexual blanks’ frequently enables the life experiences of gay- and lesbian-headed families to be eclipsed. This phenomenon was articulated by one of the participants, Lisa. She discussed being rendered invisible as a lesbian when asked if ‘mothering’ changed the way people saw her. She said:

In the public? Yeah! [People see us as] three generations … definitely people see us as a family unit, but honestly, it is consistently grandma or sister … So they see you as a unit, but they construct it in some other way. So it hasn’t been a hostile experience, because people have not formed it [as a lesbian relationship] … It’s not two lesbians with a baby, it’s grandmother [and] mother.

Lesbians have reported similar experiences in other studies. Mercer and Harold (2003, p. 42) found that ‘school personnel mistakenly attributed some other (non-partner) relationship to the respondent and her same-sex partner’. This lack of ability to ‘see’ difference in sexual orientation is a mechanism of regulation that operates below a conscious refusal of Otherness. It is important for educators to understand, however, that when they render key aspects of a person’s identity invisible, the recipient experiences a form of symbolic violence at a psychic level (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 41).

Issues of visibility and invisibility are complex in lesbian and gay communities because visibility is both liberating and threatening. Much of the political activism within gay and lesbian communities aims to address the symbolic violence that stems from this ontological denial and thus shift the imbalance of power between heterosexual and homosexual identities. In the everyday, however, homophobia impacts on LGBTQ people in a trajectory of violence that ranges from denial to verbal abuse and eventually physical forms of violence such as gay bashing. To avoid emotional and physical violence, those who identify as gay or lesbian are usually skilled in an array of sexual identity performances that enable them to move between visibility and invisibility as a sexual Other (Griffin, 1991).

The vernaculars of gay and lesbian communities reflect the widespread use of nuanced acts of protection. If an individual perceives recognition of their sexual identity in a particular context as risky, they may present as heterosexual; these acts are named as ‘passing’, ‘playing it straight’, or remaining ‘closeted’. These terms basically refer to the act of masquerading as an identity one ‘is not’, a strategy for attaining the necessary distance between ‘oneself and one’s image’ to avoid discrimination (Doane, 1987, p. 2). Alternately, individuals may choose to identify as lesbian or gay by ‘coming out’ or ‘camping it up’.

We contend that motherhood brings a new dimension to these variable and nuanced performances of sexuality. With the birth of a child, a new social landscape opens up and new subjectivities are negotiated via the emotionally saturated relationship between mother(s) and child. The experience of mothering raises complex issues for lesbians about disclosing their sexual identities. The presence of a young child may compel parents to ‘come out’ outside of the relative safety of their homes and gay and lesbian communities (Casper, 2003).

The participants in this study reflected on the way they negotiated, presented or performed as parents in their early childhood setting. These performances were designed to balance their need for family pride with the possibility of homophobic reactions towards their young children. All the women expressed a degree of concern that their children would in the future experience discrimination or harassment as a result of their parents’ challenges to heteronormativity, a phenomenon reported in other studies (McNair, Dempsey, Wise & Perlesz, 2002; Mercer & Harold, 2003). Yet, in spite of their anxieties about homophobic reaction, participants all also stressed the need for disclosure, aware that in ‘coming out’ there is little chance of returning to the closet. One of the participants, Meredith, articulated the imperative to come out for her daughter’s sake:

I do think that her major support, up until she’s going to school, where she looks for clues on how loved she is, primarily come from her parents. And if we show some level of shame … then she’s going to be shamed. But if we show a cohesive front and she sees at home that we’re proud to be her parents, are proud to love her and we want her to be proud of us, then … ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.’ The core strength for her in the coming years has to come from us being 100 per cent positive … I’m not going to go to a childcare function with, ‘I’m an out and proud lesbian’ written on my shirt, but I’m certainly not going to go to a function and pretend [my partner] is my sister. We have to show [our child] that we are proud of who we are and happy with who we are, and if we shy away from that, then she’ll feel she’s got something to hide.

Meredith’s use of the child’s rebuttal emphasises her belief that educational settings are potentially sites of discrimination, a perception which is validated in the literature (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Letts & Sears, 1999). She was determined that her child should learn that it is not only possible to have a lesbian-headed family but also possible to challenge heteronormative discourses.

However, Meredith was also keenly aware of the risks of being ‘out’. Indeed, her comment showed she understood her position as precarious, and more likely to be accepted if she framed herself as a ‘good
homosexual’—one who does not ‘flaunt’ her sexuality or challenge the (heterosexual) status quo (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). The power implicit in the heterosexual-us/homosexual-them binary (Sedgwick, 1990) enables those constituted within dominant heterosexual discourses to have a ‘right’ to ‘accept’ and/or make judgements about those who are Other, and Meredith was careful not to take up a potentially antagonistic position.

Meredith’s sense that the pride of the parents contributes to the resilience of the child is supported in the literature. Golombok and Tasker (1996) draw parallels between lesbian mothers’ openness and pride in their identity and family structure and children’s subsequent acceptance of their family constellation. Disclosure in educational environments promises to relieve many of the social stresses involved in parent-care negotiations. When disclosure is positively received, it benefits the child by enabling authentic family-setting relations and educational success (Ryan & Martin, 2000).

When Meredith and her partner initially sought child care, they had very little knowledge about the field and what to expect. They did, however, discuss their relationship with the peak organisation. They were pleasantly surprised by the inclusive conceptions of family that were communicated to them on their application for family day care.

I had myself down as a single mother and there are two spaces for the parent details, and she said, ‘Are you a single mother?’ And I said, ‘I’ve got a partner’, and she said, ‘Well, put your partner down in that area’. And I said, ‘Well, my partner’s a woman.’ And she said, ‘You’re not the only people on our books where the partner’s a woman … we’re completely fine with that.’ And I said, ‘What about the carers?’ She said, ‘They may have their own opinions; we see all types of families who require family day care and your type of family is no more interesting than the next type of family.’ … Right from the beginning they’ve been fantastic and supportive. If they ring up, it’s ‘Hello Meredith and Kaylene.’ It’s not ‘Hello Meredith, mother of baby.’ It’s ‘Hello Meredith and Kaylene.’

These interactions led them to believe that their child’s carer knew about their family structure. While happy with the care of their child, over time they came to realise that the carer herself would not explicitly refer to or validate their family structure with their child. Meredith and her partner did not pursue being ‘out’ with their child’s carer. They hoped their child was too young to notice the carer’s silence about their family type. So, in spite of their belief that a nurturing environment for their child required acceptance of their sexuality, they did not challenge the carer’s silence as they did not want to disrupt what they considered was otherwise (hard to access) quality care for their child.

In their case, the administrators in the organisation could deal with the differences that sexuality brought to families. It appears, however, that the carers who actually did the day-to-day work with families and their children were not adequately supported to make the attitudinal changes necessary to ensure equity of service provision. This gap in service provision needs to be addressed for the organisation to actually provide quality care for children from gay- and lesbian-headed households.

The vulnerability of new lesbian mothers is highlighted by Meredith and her partner’s choice to live with an invisibility they ultimately believed was damaging. When asked about the things that would make them feel safe about pursuing the recognition of their family structure, Meredith’s partner Kaylene suggested:

The day-to-day reality of just walking in and actually just seeing on the wall pictures of other people like myself; you know, two women with children, two guys with children, straight family with children, the grandmother of a different racial group—just seeing those images there and knowing that is just part of the daily visual input of those children, that would make me feel [accepted] … not necessarily as political dogma for the children, but [as something to] lower people’s own reactivity [to differences].

One of the unique features of lesbian-headed families is that, unlike other families who experience oppression on the grounds of their Otherness, there is often no historical experience of family resistance to heteronormativity. All new mothers enter a new affective territory as they negotiate the world on behalf of their infants, a developmental transition identified in the research as a significant time of stress (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). However, as Casper (2003) suggests, this stress is intensified for lesbian parents who invariably have witnessed or have direct past experiences of homophobia. The lesbian families in this study feared their children would have the same experience. Emotionally, witnessing one’s child experiencing discrimination may well be more distressing than experiencing it oneself. Meredith said:

...because I’ve gone through the hard times with my family and I think I can face anything, but to see my own daughter cry, if someone says, ‘your mum’s a filthy dyke’, or something like that, will actually be really hard to deal with. I’m an adult and I can feel my pain, but to see my daughter in pain would upset me.

Meredith distinguished between her capabilities to feel her own pain, and being upset or disrupted by her daughter’s pain. The concept of emotional capital is useful for understanding the emotional rawness of a lesbian mother’s experience of discrimination directed at her child. Emotional capital is a resource that
enables people to express their emotions in ways that enhance rather than detract from their social power within the social field (Reay, 2002). Reay conducted research with working-class and black mothers, and argues that emotional skills and knowledge can be intergenerationally accumulated. This emotional capital enables marginalised people to resist the psychic violence of discrimination in educational institutions and productively fight for change. Lesbian identities tend not to be intergenerational and new lesbian mothers often have no inherited resources that assist them to negotiate the value attached to their ‘difference’ within the field of education.

In addition, the relative newness of lesbian mother networks means that many families are frequently negotiating the field of education without the cultural capital and knowledge that is often accumulated by heterosexual women in their informal networks. Most participants in this study had very little knowledge about children’s services. In this respect, early childhood settings are crucial sites of experience where lesbian mothers can increase the emotional and cultural resources they have to negotiate normative parenting discourses in other educational and social fields.

The representation of non-normative families

Unlike Meredith and Kaylene, the remaining women interviewed opted to be ‘out’ by declaring their situation directly to carers. However, once visible, they found that the process of maintaining visibility was difficult and ongoing because of the pervasive construction of family as heterosexual and as biological. Every participant discussed the lack of representation of diverse identities and family types within early childhood environments. Heteronormative assumptions were evident in the way most services perceived the daily routines of the children and in the way their social worlds were (not) represented in centre curriculum.

Within the childcare settings used by interviewees, family was generally conceived to be one or two parents who held the responsibility for the routine daily needs of the child. This assumption was apparent to one of the participants, Sam, through the attitudes of childcare staff to the organisation of her son’s transitions between home and the centre.

He’s always been picked up by lots of different people. I mean this is a really serious thing in relation to how he’s figured in [our] community; he doesn’t have the one person … he’s always had a broad range of people coming to get him and take him away. That was quite difficult for [practitioners] to begin with actually, and then they just kind of got used to it … Nobody ever actually says, ‘That’s weird’, but what they do is make comments like [shifts to a slightly incredulous tone], ‘Is someone getting him today?’ Or ‘Toby’s got a lot of friends or aunties’ … I don’t think that I’m being paranoid … it’s just the phrasing of those kind of things, [that] indicate that’s unusual … you know that it’s not within their ‘normal’ range…

Diverse family constellations are not unusual in gay and lesbian communities, in our study, or indeed in the community at large. As Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001, p. 9) point out, family is increasingly ‘being deployed to denote something broader than the traditional relationships based on lineage, alliance and marriage, referring instead to kin-like networks of relationships, based on friendship, and commitments beyond blood’ [original emphasis]. In gay and lesbian communities, people create different family types in response to feelings of not belonging; a rejection of ‘oppressive heterosexual connotations’ along with a desire for and a celebration of one’s own family/community (Weeks et al., 2001, p. 10).

This shift in family structures and formation is not unique to lesbian- and gay-headed households. Indeed, in her analysis of globalisation and its impact on family life, Carrington (2002) suggests that changes in family formations are increasingly common across the broader community. This necessitates significant shifts in thinking for many early childhood practitioners who need to move beyond the idea that there is one family structure they will deal with, or even that family structures are stable through time or space.

The women interviewed were conscious that their non-normative family lives may lead their children to experience struggles over concepts of family and over ideas of what is admissible as loving human relationships. Indeed, their narratives included many stories about their child’s interactions with peers and practitioners that illustrated these struggles were occurring (Skattebol, in review). This created an impetus for them to introduce or request curriculum resources that portrayed same-sex families. In a number of instances the lesbian mothers purchased books for the centre in the hope such resources would be used to represent and ‘normalise’ non-heterosexual and diverse families. Repeatedly, however, resources were not used or available to children. Lola requested that the service buy resources:

The first thing I did when the kids started asking about daddies and stuff was to see his [teacher] and say ‘Do you have any books? What sort of resources do you have?’ After much hassling, like it probably took six, seven months, they went out and bought a couple of books … which actually I’ve never seen anywhere in the centre.

Deb related a similar experience with her 21-month-old:
I said to them, ‘Where are the books?’ and they said, ‘Oh we’ve got some in the locked cupboard’ and I said, ‘Can you bring them out?’ and she said, ‘Yeah, occasionally we bring them out and read them to the big kids’ and I said, ‘Can we put them in the little room for a while?’ … So they ended up the next day in the little room. And the next day I said ‘It’d be great if we had some more’, and that’s when they sort of said, well off you go [to buy the resources] … They were kind of at a loss of how they access those sorts of resources.

Two key issues are highlighted in these comments. First, the ability of early childhood professionals to access resources that deal with sexuality differences and second, their use of these resources. In terms of the former, it is worth reiterating the human geography of the area. All of these centres were within the parameters of a lesbian enclave, highly visible to those who can see beyond heterosexism. There were several prominent bookshops in the vicinity that carried gay and lesbian books for children. Gay and lesbian magazines were given away in many local cafes. If resources were hard to find, it was because people did not look. Such apparent lack of initiative or ‘unknowing’ may be linked to Robinson’s (2002, p. 9) ‘hierarchy of differences’ in early childhood pedagogies. She argues that educators are more likely to take up issues that link to their own identity, experiences and knowledge about difference, ‘their religious and cultural values, [and] their positioning in sexist, heterosexist, homophobic and racist discourses’. Additionally, many teachers may be apprehensive about addressing lesbian/gay issues for fear of being read as lesbian or gay themselves. Hence, lesbian/gay-headed families may be positioned at the bottom of this hierarchy, and other ‘safer’ issues and identities given priority by educators.

In addition, even when resources were available in settings, it was the lesbian families rather than educators who were frequently placed in the position of taking the risks that make sexuality differences visible. Deb felt that the educators at her daughter’s setting were genuinely trying to incorporate their family but were limited in their resourcefulness. For example, they presented a family collage in which children were encouraged to cut out pictures of diverse families. However, a non-heterosexual model was not included because the magazines used were exclusively mainstream. Feeling frustrated about the continued lack of inclusion of her child and family, Deb herself added a quirky cartoon of a lesbian family to the collage when it was displayed on the wall.

Deb’s use of humour in this representation was linked to her sense of risk in putting herself forward in this way, and aligns with Meredith’s earlier strategy of positioning herself as a ‘good’ homosexual by avoiding t-shirts emblazoned with ‘I am a lesbian’. Humour was intended to temper the challenge that her contribution made to heteronormativity. Through this act, Deb’s family was included for the first time in the visual culture of the centre, potentially challenging people’s heteronormative values. This political act of inclusion, however, was left to the individuals most vulnerable to heteronormative forces.

When the books are out…

The interviewees felt that simplistic, one-off or tokenistic representations positioned them as a highly visible Other to ‘normal’ families. It was felt this Othering produced a hypervisibility that had the potential to result in, or exacerbate, homophobic responses from members of the childcare community. Rema discussed the problem of a poorly considered approach to inclusive curriculum that foregrounded her family’s difference from the two-parent heteronormative model.

They want photos of how people constitute their families, which is actually a really good thing. I haven’t done it and the reason I haven’t done it is I have a strong sense of not wanting Declan to be a complete freak. If I had a photo of his family, there would be maybe five people, six people … not actually blood-related, and it sounds really stupid because there’s a part of me that just doesn’t want a picture with him and Maeve and I, because that’s not his [only] family … so I’m still in the process of working out who to put in that photo and how to manage it in a way that doesn’t mark him out in a context that they can’t support him in. … If I felt that they [the teachers] were having these conversations I would do that [i.e. provide the photo] … It’s the thing where you can see that they’re trying … to go, ‘Here we’ve got different families’, but actually for me, all that does is reinscribe the fact that he’s not in that model.

In Declan’s family, a number of non-biologically related people contribute to the everyday running of the household and form an emotional and social fabric of his world. This everyday situation may or may not be significantly different from that of other children in the centre. The inclusion of a single photo, however, encourages all families to reduce their families to heteronormative models. As Rema pointed out, a static image produces a singular focus on structure, which runs the risk of inscribing her child’s life as ‘abnormal’ or strange. It reinforces a binary where Declan would not only stand alone as different from all the other children at the centre by virtue of his mothers’ sexuality, but also deny his everyday experiences of family.

It may well be that many children live in large family networks of biological and non-biological family. Curriculum that relies on single, limited representations...
of children's families tend to interpolate fixed family structures and erase the fluid functional networks that support everyday life. Furthermore, the everyday functional practices of families would inevitably include the myriad ways people 'do' supposedly gendered tasks and roles. It offers a much richer curriculum platform and scaffolds connections and community between families.

An example of practice that drew on this idea came from a setting that also continuously displayed different representations of gay and lesbian and Other families at the entrance. Here, family life was a continuous source of curriculum. Children brought in a steady stream of family photos showing various aspects of their home lives—picnics, Sunday breakfasts, gardens, end-of-year holidays and so on. This allowed for the relationships between lesbian mothers to be explored alongside the many family combinations and relationships that all children experienced. The focus was on what children did with their families, not on what their families were. When limited to single and static representations, family photos do little to disrupt the heterosexual/us-/homosexual-them binary and the hegemonic gender relations that underpin it, limiting the options of all people, including heterosexuals (Sedgwick, 1990). A focus on what families do not only addresses some of the issues of safety and representation for gay and lesbian families, but also has the potential to strengthen genuine practitioner–family relationships for all families.

Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined some of the issues raised by lesbian-headed families in their experiences and perceptions of childcare services. The conceptual underpinning of much early childhood curriculum has a heteronormative base that inhibits educators’ thinking about a range of issues related to family diversity (Boldt, 1997; Casper, 2003; Silin, 1995). We propose that educators need to create environments that reduce the risks for marginalised families to disclose their differences from normative models of family. For this to occur, services need to ensure that diverse family structures are visible in their resources and interactions. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, a conceptual move needs to be made from a singular focus on family structures to more nuanced and detailed engagement with the ways families function in terms of gendered roles, biological and social connections. Attention to the ways families function does much to address the issues of hypervisibility and/or invisibility identified in our earlier discussion as problematic to the participants’ sense of safety within childcare environments.

We are not suggesting that children can never stand alone in the ways their families differ from other families, or that sexuality differences should be subsumed under a supposedly asexual representation of families. This will only reinscribe heteronormativity. Rather, representations and understandings of differences need to be highly nuanced, and the safety of families and children negotiated. For this negotiation to take place, trust is necessary and educators need to take some of the risks. An engagement with the very real differences between families might be unsettling, but, as Hughes and Mac Naughton (1999) suggest, family members have the potential to enrich teaching practices. As Rema insightfully suggested, moving beyond heteronormativity in work with young children means that early childhood educators:

...have to read the books and occasionally talk about mums and mums … to shift the way [they] relate to children. It’s not much to do. On another level it’s kind of a funny mental shift that actually requires thinking about and doing it.

Thinking and doing, in this sense, requires educators to be reflexive about their own ideas about sexuality and family, and to take well-considered risks that challenge homophobia in ways that allow lesbian families to establish productive connections with the families of their children's friends.

References


Introduction

The WORLD-RENOWNED humanitarian Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu, in his foreword to the UNICEF publication, *For Every Child*, wrote:

> We each can make a difference if we are vigilant to create a new kind of society, more compassionate, more caring, more sharing where human rights, where children’s rights are respected and protected. Politicians ultimately offer what the people want. Let us tell them we want peace and prosperity for everyone (Castle, 2000, p. 4).

Politicians of the Australian Federal Government could have been accused of not respecting and protecting the rights of all young children who were under their legal protection. The majority of young Australian children are raised in a safe and secure environment and receive adequate services, including education, to enable them to grow and develop into fully functioning citizens of the community. This paper will illustrate that not all children residing in Australia have a safe and secure environment. This applied to those children who arrived as asylum seekers.

Children who arrive in Australia as asylum seekers are likely to have experienced severe trauma. Such trauma is made worse by being held in detention centres.

The Refugee Council of Australia (2000, p. 1) believe ‘these children have often experienced horrific torture and subsequent trauma’. According to international human rights, all children have basic rights to education (Castle, 2000). In detention centres, children did not have access to appropriate education, especially early childhood education. It was only after public pressure was applied to the government in 2005 that all children and families were released from detention centres. This included those incarcerated on Christmas Island.

Historical information

In the past decade, war has affected many people. In 1996 alone, more than 24 million people worldwide were displaced from their homes, half of whom were children (Machel, 1996). By the time children reach refugee camps and detention centres, they have been vulnerable to increased risk factors associated with displacement, including violence, rape, mutilation, molestation, trafficking, separation from parents, and conscription (Sims, Hayden, Palmer & Hutchins, 2000). Children who arrive in Australia as asylum seekers are likely to have experienced severe trauma and have generally been deprived of the basic necessities of food, shelter and safety (Refugee Council of Australia, 2000; Thomas & Lau, 2002).
Legally, the control of people entering Australia is managed through the Migration Act (1958), which stipulates that all non-citizens who enter or stay in Australia must have a valid visa to do so (Crock & Saul, 2002). Pettman (1992) states the Australian Federal Government’s determination to control who enters Australia has a long history, associated with fear linked to politics of prejudice and difference. Consequently, all people who enter Australia by boat or plane without a visa are deemed ‘unlawful citizens’. Since 1994, these people have been immediately placed in detention centres while their refugee status is assessed. Some of these detentions are on remote Pacific Islands such as Nauru. This creates further challenges of providing adequate services to families and children. Those assessed as genuine refugees are given Temporary Protection Visas, as a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As a consequent to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Refugee Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Federal Government of Australia is obligated to provide education for children (Castle, 2000) and to ensure equity for all (Campbell et al., 2001; MacNaughton, 1999). Education in detention centres was controlled by the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, which outsourced the running of detention centres (and subsequently education) to a private company, Australasian Correctional Management.

The Australian Federal Government failed to meet the basic needs of children who arrived in Australia prior to 2005. Furthermore, Australia violated the guidelines set out in the Convention on Children’s Rights with regard to the practice of mandatory detention of asylum seekers. While in detention, children were not given adequate care to ensure their needs and rights were met, and were not provided with adequate services to assist them in dealing with past experiences (National Council of Churches in Australia, as cited in Cologon, 2003).

**Early childhood education for some and not others**

Conditions in these centres did not meet the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child applies equally to all children within Australia regardless of their legal status, location or living arrangement. This article sets out the core minimum obligation, which is to ensure that primary education should be made ‘available and accessible to every child’ (UNICEF, 1989, p. 8). Broad goals for education include the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. Additionally, Article 37(b) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states: ‘The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child … shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time’ (UNICEF, 1989, p. 10). Cologon (2003) believes detention of children in detention centres in Australia was not a measure of last resort. Detention had been the first option for these children.

**Maladaptive behaviours**

There are many children worldwide who have experienced similar traumas to the children who were detained. Research conducted by Thomas and Lau (2002) on childhood trauma suggests that unaccompanied children in detention centres may be under significant psychological risk. Additionally, the effect of incarceration suggests it is detrimental to children's overall wellbeing and contributes to aggression, fear and psychological disorders (Van der Veer, 1998). Cologon (2003) argues that within Australian detention centres nothing was being done to promote early childhood education, as characterised by experiences tailored to individual differences. Research in early childhood education suggests that play therapy (Oehlberg, 1998; Webb, 1999), caring relationships and supportive environments enhance opportunities for children to deal with past traumatic experiences. Furthermore, Hunt (1994, as cited in Cologon, 2003) and Robertson (2000) found that expression and healing through visual and expressive art (drawing, dance, painting, song) creates stability for children and assists them to build resilience.

There is no evidence from Australian immigration detention centres indicating that appropriate educational strategies were in place. Research suggests that children were denied appropriate education activities to assist them in overcoming the effects of any trauma they may have experienced (Cologon, 2003). This was evident in the case of a young Chinese toddler who had been detained since birth with her mother at Villawood Detention Centre. Even though this child had no visible physical or neurological problems, she was psychologically disturbed and an elective mute. Public pressure applied to the Department of Immigration resulted in the release of the young child and her mother into the community.

Marans and Adelman (1997, cited in Sims et al., 2000) found the extreme nature of detained children's experiences causes them to adjust in ways that are developmentally dangerous. Children may begin to display behaviours that are labelled as aggressive or withdrawn by other children and adults, resulting in isolation from peer groups. Bloom (1995) recommends that education policy-makers and practitioners should consider such a child as injured, through no cause of their own. Sims et al. (2000) agree that educators need to understand that repetitive re-enactment of their trauma is triggered by outside stimuli and is not something children are able to easily control. Children need to be understood and offered alternative methods for coping through an educative process. It is imperative
that the maladaptive behaviours of children who are detained are addressed, in order to prevent maladaptive behaviours being passed on to their own children.

Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny and Pardo (1992) found that children who do not receive appropriate support in their early years of education have a higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder. Such children can develop extremely aggressive behaviours, depression and learning difficulties (Lawson, 1995, cited in Sims et al., 2000, p. 26). However, research conducted by Rutter and Hyde (1998) indicates that children who are able to access appropriate early childhood environments are less likely to need specialised therapy or intervention. Supportive early childhood environments have a significant impact on a young child’s development, especially when ‘working respectfully with parents across cultural boundaries’ (MacNaughton, 1999, p. 16).

From their research with early childhood teachers, Sims et al. (2000) identified the symptom of chronic fear among preschool-aged children from detention centres. Teachers felt children appeared to be constantly watching them and indicated this was a behaviour that they had observed in children who had witnessed violence in their home environment. This fear was exacerbated at sleep-time, when children appeared to feel they were in an unfamiliar environment. One teacher described a child who was scared of all people wearing uniforms. Fear was also triggered by loud noises such as sirens and trains nearby.

Both traumatisation and uprooting from a familiar cultural environment can impede the psychological development of children. Consequently, various processes that are important for child development may be inhibited. Often, observational learning from parents (as role models) is restricted because parental functioning is affected by their own trauma and coping mechanisms. Communication and misunderstandings caused by cultural differences can also create difficulties for child development, especially in regard to identity development (Van Der Veer, 1998).

**Young children with diverse needs**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) has been designed to ensure children with diverse needs have the opportunity to participate in all aspects of their community. The detention of children with diverse needs creates barriers in achieving integration with community services. The National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention (2004) argued that, by legislating the mandatory detention of children with diverse needs, the Commonwealth assumed the responsibility of ensuring that these children were provided with appropriate support and care, such as they would receive in any Australian community.

The inquiry also reported that the Immigration Detention Standards did not specifically address the provision of care of children with diverse needs. It was established that the Department of Immigration had failed to ensure that children with diverse needs received appropriate education in accordance with their specific needs. Consequently, there had been insufficient staff and support to develop and implement an education strategy within immigration detention centres. This is a contravention of Article 23, ‘Disabled Children’, of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Additionally, the inquiry stated that there were inadequate efforts to enrol children with diverse needs in schools outside the detention centre that could have provided appropriate staff and facilities. One psychologist stated to the inquiry:

*There is an abundance of research about the ill effects of institutional settings on people with disability. It is widely agreed that those settings have negative effects on people with disability in terms of their health, emotional, intellectual and social developments (National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention, 2004, p. 509).*

**Inappropriate educational provisions**

There was a lack of school resources (e.g. books, play equipment and paper) within detention centres. Australasian Correctonal Management’s (ACM) rationale for the poor provision of teaching material was documented as, ‘we can’t provide much more material because the next time they riot it will all get burnt and then we will just have to replace it’ (National Inquiry in Children in Detention Centres, 2004, p. 600). Evidence from teachers who formerly worked in detention centres, ACM staff and documents received by the inquiry all indicated problems with the provision of curriculum resources.

Children in detention centres were not able to form close relationships with teachers due to their teachers’ appearance and short-term contracts. Teachers working in detention centres were generally expected to wear ACM uniforms (National Inquiry into Children in Detention Centres, 2004). The inquiry found that several teachers working at Woomera Detention Centre commented that it was initially difficult for children to distinguish between teachers and detention officers. The teachers reported that it would have been easier to carry out their role as a teacher without being in uniform. The education coordinator from Woomera told the inquiry that teachers wore uniforms and security earpieces in case of emergency, as there was no other form of contact in education areas. However the children reported that they perceived the teachers to be
detention officers rather than teachers, because they looked the same.

Children who received internal schooling in immigration detention centres had limited access (no longer than two hours per day). In comparison, children within Australian schools generally have access to approximately six hours of education per day (including breaks). The low number of tuition hours for children in detention is linked to the shortage of teachers and classrooms. Furthermore, because of the lack of teachers, children were inadequately assessed as to their educational needs, and there was insufficient reporting of children’s educational progress.

**Cultural alienation**

Because Australia is perceived as a culturally diverse country, many early childhood educators have long recognised the need for early childhood programs to address issues of culture (MacNaughton, 1999). Children who do not belong to the dominant cultural group must learn to function in two different sociocultural environments, creating bicultural children. It is imperative that educators assist children to develop strategies for surviving amid the constant tension created by conflicting cultural values and conditions of cultural subordination. Cultural diversity is a reason for celebration and should not be devalued because minority cultures are viewed as different to the dominant culture.

There is a common fallacy that early childhood educators who design and implement programs which focus mainly on the visible aspects of culture are often seduced by a belief in the causal relationship between the promotion of lifestyles and the enhancement of life chances (Troyka & Carrington, 1990, cited in Glover, 1994). Many early childhood educators sincerely believe that tokenistic experiences, which introduce children to cultural diversity, will result in social harmony. MacNaughton (1999, p. 6) describes tokenism as ‘the superficial recognition that an issue exists but the expenditure of only minimal effort to try to resolve it’. Unfortunately, social harmony does not occur as an outcome of tokenistic gestures such as placing pictures of minority ethnic groups on the classroom wall.

**In Australia and elsewhere**

Early childhood educator Flack (2002) visited the Curtin Immigration Detention Centre, located in the Kimberley area of Western Australia. Flack interviewed families and children about their situation. At all times, a Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs officer was present. Children exhibited symptoms of chronic fear, ranging from baulking at any noise, constantly keeping their eyes low and watching the Australasian Correctional Management officer during the interviews (Flack, 2002). From this research, it was established that not every preschool- and primary-school-aged child attended the local school, and it was Australasian Correctional Management who decided which children could attend. Furthermore, there was no teacher who came to the detention centre. Families became confused when they realised they were allowed to have education but were not given access.

Flack (2002) argued that the basic detention centre environment reflected poorly upon child development. Few items existed to ‘stimulate a child’s mind or encourage a child to be creative’ even though many families had requested educational books and material for learning English (p. 10). The majority of education in the detention centre was self-learning, requiring high levels of self-motivation. The environment sent messages of stagnation, hopelessness and a general lack of safety. There was no predictability in relationships between people, with children exposed to more adults than children. Flack stated that:

> You look at some children within our communities, and generally you see a joy and spirit, a vivacity and curiosity and wonder. In the children at Curtin there was none of that. They looked bored and listless. It’s like their spirits have been washed away (2002, p. 10).

Dolgopol (2002) visited Woomera Detention Centre and found similar issues such as lack of educational and recreational equipment and activities available to children. Parents were acutely aware of the impact that boredom and depression had on their children. At Woomera, children under 12 were given just two hours of schooling a day. Dolgopol described parental feelings of guilt and frustration, as parents felt they were not protecting their children by providing them with a safe and secure future. One Woomera detainee father said: ‘Just send my children to school, and let them be in freedom. They should live in a human good atmosphere, they should learn something good, and not the things they are learning here’ (National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention, 2004, p. 579).

Devereaux (2004) describes the treatment of asylum seekers in New Zealand as a model example to Australia of understanding human rights. Refugees are detained in the Mangere Refugee Centre, located in Auckland. There is an open gate into a car park, with a two-metre cyclone fence surrounding a number of buildings, all open and visible, connected by footpaths and well-tended lawns and gardens. Devereaux (2004) explains how teachers and children were taking pride in their educational programs within the centre. The centre had colourful classrooms and children were laughing, running and playing.

In contrast to Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers, the example of 40 Afghan boys who were rescued
from the sinking container ship MV Tampa in 2001 demonstrates New Zealand's commitment to children's rights. The boys were immediately made wards of the state and given full rights of citizenship. The boys were accepted as students at Selwyn College, Auckland, which enabled them to integrate into the school community. The immigration service located surviving members of their families in Afghanistan and has since flown them to New Zealand to be relocated with their children. Devereaux (2004, p. 17) describes how the New Zealand community realised that the ‘gifts’ these boys had brought with them were immeasurable.

Conclusion

It needs to be reiterated that every child is entitled to appropriate educational standards. This means children in all educational settings should have access to appropriate resources, curriculum and teachers. Research suggests that the intervention of early childhood education can help children cope and overcome the effects of trauma (Cologon, 2003). This was not made available to children in detention in Australia prior to July 2005. The National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention (2004) clearly highlighted the Australian Federal Government’s breach of commitment to early childhood education for both children and parents before 2005. Children in detention should have had access to mainstream schooling and community support; however there were few appropriate strategies in place that allowed children to attend and function within a community. Given the events of the recent past, the right of every child to education within the Australian context requires greater understanding. At the very least, an empathetic approach to the treatment of children and families must be ensured.

References


Complexities and compromises
Understanding parents’ experiences and choice of early childhood education and care services

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GIVEN THE COMPLEXITY AND RANGE of choice of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, as well as the diversity of family situations, research eliciting parent conceptions of their choices of early childhood services is both necessary and timely. This paper brings to light some important issues in relation to knowledge and understanding of parent choice regarding early childhood services. It synthesises findings from an initial study that aimed to investigate the ways parents make their choices of early childhood services, and examines and interprets the meanings they ascribe to those choices (see Noble, 2005).

AN AWARENESS OF THE variation that exists in the way parents conceptualise early childhood services and make choices for young children should necessarily inform and be reflected in future policy reforms. This paper presents a model, based on findings from the aforementioned study, which usefully illustrates the dilemmas of parents in conceptualising and choosing services for their children and explores the implications of their individual decisions in aggregate. Therefore, an exploration of the relationship between parental experiences of ECEC services and the influence of this on their choices ensues. By utilising the process of integrative synthesis, applied to the findings from the previous mixed modal study (see Noble, 2005, 2006a, 2006b), the author demonstrates the complexities of choice juxtaposed with parent experiences of these services.

Introduction

Young children benefit from experiences and environments that build on their life-world. Different types of children’s services provide young children with diverse experiences (Brannen & Moss, 2003; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2002; Fleer, 2000; Moss, 2003; Rodd, 1996; Smith, 1994; Stonehouse, 1994; Vincent, Ball, Kemp & Radcliffe, 2002). Coupled with this, the early years are a national priority area (Cobb, Danby & Farrell, 2005; Sumption, 2006) and research into parental choice of ECEC services is of particular importance to policy-makers, early years professionals and families. An awareness of the variation in the ways parents conceptualise ECEC services and make choices for their young children is therefore important to the development of a greater understanding of the impacts of such services on children and their families.

This paper draws together the findings of a phenomenographic and an orthodox grounded theory investigation aimed at generating new knowledge of an under-researched area: parental choice of ECEC services (see Noble, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). Given the use of the mixed method design of this study, it was critical to have a strategy that systematically integrated the two sets of findings. Therefore an integrated synthesis was developed. However, before presenting the integrated synthesis, in the nature of a model, it is useful to briefly outline the findings from each of the aforementioned investigations. The first was a phenomenographic-inspired approach (Marton, 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Marton & Booth, 1997); the second was motivated by orthodox grounded theory (Glaser, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).
Demographic location of the study

The community that was the focus of the study is located in regional Queensland. The nearest major regional centre has a population of 30,000 and is 25 kilometres away. The community has a population of approximately 3500 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002a); the majority of the residents are employed as manufacturing workers or supply industry employees (92.9%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002a). The median weekly family income is $1000–$1199 and the mean household size is 2.9 persons. Therefore it can be seen that, within this community context, there is a low unemployment rate, with a relatively high level of family income.

Within the shire, 54.2 per cent of families and households consist of couples with children, 34.4 per cent of families are couples without children, 10.9 per cent of households are one-parent families, and 0.5 per cent comprises the category of other families (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002b). Within the local community there are four ECEC services catering for young children and their families. There are two licensed long day care centres: one caters for children from six weeks of age, the other for children from 12 months of age. There are also two state preschool centres.

Participants

Interviews with parents of young children accessing ECEC services provided the data for this study. So that as great an internal variation as possible was captured in the sample, all parents, as users of one or more of the four ECEC services available in the local community, were invited to participate. The sample of parents comprised mothers only, although mothers and fathers had been invited to participate. Nine mothers had used only one service, whereas 14 had accessed more than one. Single, semi-structured interviews were conducted with these 23 parents from a regional area of Central Queensland, exploring their experiences of ECEC services and how they chose the service(s). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Phenomenographic investigation

Phenomenographic research attempts to describe, analyse and understand the meanings people ascribe to the world and how they interpret significant phenomena (Marton, 1981). The phenomenographic approach is valuable in investigations involving individuals’ conceptions collectively (Gerber, 1993; Sandberg, 1994). Phenomenography aims to reveal and investigate the different ways people experience phenomena in their world (Bruce, 1997; Dahlgren, 1993; Dall’Alba, 1996; Marton, 1996; Pramlng, 1995). A phenomenographic research approach offers an insider perspective of early childhood services. The desire to obtain an ‘insider view’ or, as Marton (1981) describes it, a ‘second-order perspective’ (p. 178), distinguishes this particular study from earlier research of parents and ECEC. The phenomenographic structure adopted in the first stage of analysis supports a deep approach to understanding the situated experiences of ECEC services by parents, and thus investigated the first research question: What are parent conceptions of ECEC services? In this first stage of analysis, the phenomenographic framework was used to develop an outcome space to describe the eight categories that explain the various ways parents experience ECEC services (see Noble, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). These categories describe the way parents see ECEC services, as follows:

- **Demographically convenient**: The characteristic feature of this conception is that, in the expressions associated with this category, the child is excluded from the parents’ reflections. Instead, the parents’ thoughts become geared towards issues of demography and/or convenience. Parents expressed the understanding that convenience was related to many factors, including cost, flexibility of operating hours, and proximity to home or their work, as well as availability.

- **Safe, secure and hygienic**: In contrast to ‘demographically convenient’, the child is depicted, within the quotations combined in this category, as being in the foreground of the parents’ awareness. Therefore the focus for parents here relates to the physical dimensions of the ECEC service as they apply to children. Parents were looking for security when choosing a service. A safe, secure and hygienic environment was seen to be one in which children were safe from any form of physical harm. Children were also in a secure environment when they seemed to be happy and well-adjusted.

- **Providing a routine**: This conception focuses on the ECEC service as a place where a routine is established and maintained. In contrast to the first two categories, the characteristics of the personnel within the service are depicted in relation to how the routine affects the child. The routine must be evident; however, it is seen to be vital that it is flexible to suit the child’s needs. Within the ECEC service, parents considered it important that children are made aware of the routine, so that they are encouraged to meet expectations and to function as a part of that routine. Further, parents valued being kept informed about the routine, so they could ensure that their child was informed and prepared.

- **Caring and nurturing**: This conception focuses on the ECEC service as caring and nurturing. As in
In the previous category, the focus of the parents’ reflection within this conception is of a personnel dimension. Parents expressed the need for each child to be well cared for in a nurturing environment, with the staff at the service adopting a ‘pseudo’ parent role and thereby offering the child a high degree of emotional support.

- **Having trained and qualified staff:** This conception focuses on the service having trained and professional staff. The characteristic feature is that the parent conceptualises ECEC services by the level of such staff present. It seemed very important to parents that they have good ‘teachers’ in the service. This equated to trained and well-qualified staff. Developing a positive picture of the teacher, and feeling it to be ‘good luck’ to have that particular teacher, seems important to parents when choosing a particular ECEC service. It makes the parents feel good about another person taking over a lot of control in relation to the child.

- **Valuing parents and keeping them informed:** This conception focuses on the ECEC service as a place where parents are valued and kept informed. In contrast to the previous personnel-centred conception, within the expressions included in this category of description, the parent is depicted as the object of the relationship with the service. It is important that the service values parents and their beliefs, as well as their wishes for their child. Equally, parents expect that they will be constantly informed about their child.

- **Providing socialisation:** This conception focuses on the ECEC service as a place where socialisation occurs. The most characteristic feature of this conception is that the service is depicted in terms of the personal dimension. Typical of parent expressions in this category are that they relate directly to how the child develops the vital skills of socialisation. Therefore the ECEC service is seen as an effective agency for the provision of socialisation experiences for young children. Parents have described this conception as being two-fold in nature. First, they see that it is necessary for young children to socialise with other children who are similar in age. Second, they state that it is necessary for children to learn to socialise with other adults. Parents feel that children need to learn to cooperate with both other children and adults in ECEC services.

- **Preparing for further learning:** This conception focuses on the ECEC service as preparing children for further learning. Similar to the preceding conception, an important feature is the way the service facilitates the child’s capacity for further learning that is vital. Parents expect that the service will not only identify the child’s current levels of growth and development but will also endeavour to extend the child further.

These eight categories of description are understood and distinguished in terms of three dimensions: physical, personnel and personal. The physical dimension refers to the location and availability of services catering to the needs of the family. The personnel dimension refers to how ECEC services are judged according to the personnel who work within that environment. The personal dimension refers to how the ECEC service is judged according to how the individual children and their family are catered for and responded to within the environment.

The ‘demographically convenient’ and ‘safe, secure and hygienic’ conceptions are placed in the physical dimension since they relate to the physical attributes that parents see as necessary in ECEC services. Parents expressed these two conceptions in terms of proximity, accessibility, flexibility and availability, as well as ECEC services needing to be safe and secure environments for young children. There is a belief that services which physically cater to these conceptions suit the needs of young children and their families.

In the personnel dimension, parents list skills and attributes that ECEC staff need to demonstrate. Accordingly, the conceptions of ‘trained and qualified staff’, ‘caring and nurturing’, ‘values parents and keeps them informed’ and ‘provides a routine’ are positioned here. Parents described the need for staff to be well-qualified, trained and experienced, in order to enable them to provide a caring and nurturing atmosphere. A routine was also recognised as an important element in an ECEC service, although it was stressed that the staff needed to approach the routine in a flexible manner.

In the personal dimension, it is the linking of the physical and the personnel dimensions in the context of practice that sets the conceptions of ‘providing socialisation’ and ‘prepares them for further learning’ apart from the others. Further, these conceptions can be distinguished from the others because they couple the attributes of the physical environment and the personnel’s qualifications, training, skills and abilities and attributes with young children’s learning within the ECEC service context. Here, parents do not understand the ECEC service as a physical environment with personnel who possess a list of attributes pertinent to performing duties within an environment. They understand the service in an integrated way, as a holistic and complex environment in a particular context, catering for young children and their families. Importantly then, parents of young children are seen to hold multiple understandings of ECEC services. This phenomenographic analysis of the data examined these multiple perspectives.
Orthodox grounded theory investigation

Grounded theory, used in the second stage of analysis in this study, allowed the development of theory that ‘illuminates the area under study’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 24). This qualitative research method ‘uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 24). Grounded theory begins with a research situation, in this instance choice of ECEC services by parents. Within the data, it was the aim in this stage of analysis to understand what was happening in relation to how parents chose a service, as well as how they managed their roles. In this way, the focus here related directly to the second research question: How do parents choose ECEC services? This later analysis found that parent choice is influenced by the following:

• Relationship with child: This category describes the ways parent choice was influenced by the parents’ assessment of the needs of the child and the family and how the reactions of the child impacted on that choice. McKim (2000), whose Canadian research examined parents’ demand, use and satisfaction with childcare services, highlights this understanding when postulating ‘psychological and social characteristics of families play a significant role in childcare choice’ (p. 147). McKim’s (2000) research then supports the notion that characteristics unique to particular families will play a role in determining how such families are influenced in their choice of ECEC services. Additionally, McKim (2000) argues that parents choose a service that supports the unique needs of the children within families. Parents considered many different factors in choosing an ECEC service, based on their assessment of the needs of their child and the family, including the needs, interests and abilities of their child at the time; how the service catered and responded to the needs of the family; and how the child responded to the particular service. Thus the relationship between family needs and the child’s needs was a significant factor influencing choice. There was a tendency for parents to be influenced by their understanding of the individual needs of their child. Parents saw it as important for the ECEC service to be able to respond to the child in an individualised manner.

• Influence of significant others: This category revealed that parent choice was influenced by the opinion of others within the social context. In this instance, parents gathered information about the attributes of different ECEC services and how other parents have experienced those services. The opinions of other parents were sought rather than gaining information from a direct source, such as the ECEC services themselves. Parents indicated that their choice of ECEC service was guided by hearsay, rather than making a choice independently according to available market information. Obtaining the opinions of others who had utilised the ECEC service beforehand, and who therefore had previous experience, was important to parents in considering ECEC services.

• Understandings of childhood: The parents were influenced by their understandings of what they wished childhood to be like for their children. They then sought to choose an ECEC service that appeared to hold similar perspectives. This view concurs with a study conducted by Elliott (2003) in the western area of Sydney, where the interconnectedness between centre and home was seen to be an important criterion for parents assessing the quality of services for young children. Parents viewed ECEC services as providing opportunities for their children to feel secure, comfortable and stimulated, while at the same time making connections between the home and centre environments.

• Maximising the child’s potential: Parents were influenced by the notion of expected outcomes for their child. The parents’ choice of service was based on what that particular service appeared to be able to provide in order that their child reach the desired outcomes. Parents may view the role of ECEC services as spaces for promoting development, ensuring readiness to learn, readiness for school and enhancing school performance (Moss, 2003), therefore the choice of service can be influenced by its perceived ability to focus on such aspects.

The grounded theory that developed as a result of this stage of analysis was that parents make complex and pragmatic choices within social contexts. The accounts of the parents interviewed demonstrated that many of them identified similar issues. These issues, in relation to choice of ECEC service, included factors relating to the ECEC environment, the staff and the parents’ perceptions of the relationship between themselves, their children, the service and the wider community. Parents emphasised the impact of the social context of the community on the process of choosing ECEC services. A significant issue to emerge is that marketing did not appear to inform choice of ECEC service, as the literature indicates (Fleer, 2000; Vincent, et al., 2002). In fact, it is argued that a market approach to understanding ECEC service choice fails to recognise the young child or the individual parent as a powerful agent in the choice process. What this analysis brings to light is that local hearsay had a significant influence on this process. In fact, the impact of the influence of significant others in the local community, outside the family, was a recurring theme.
Parents also highlighted the fact that at times their choice of ECEC service was mediated by pragmatic concerns. They chose services that met the practical needs of their family in terms of co-location of children, affordability and demographic convenience. Therefore, while parents may hold an idealistic perspective of what they wish for in an ECEC service, they may not find it in their local community and, instead, make their choice based on availability. Some parents make their choice based on pragmatic factors alone, as meeting the needs of the family is deemed to be most important. What is evident is that, because of the limited number and range of ECEC services in particular locations, the ECEC market can rely heavily on the opinions and perceptions of other parents already using a particular service, or those who have previously experienced the service. In some locations, parents are left to choose a service that ‘best fits’ their expectations, rather than one flexible enough to meet their changing agendas. Therefore one can assume that, in some instances, ECEC services are less responsive to forces of marketing, instead leaving parents to employ different strategies to assist them in their choice.

**Integrated synthesis**

In the final section of this paper, the relationship between parent conceptions of ECEC services and their influence on the choice of services will be discussed. This study did not attempt to match individual conceptions of ECEC services to individual categories or indicators of choice of service. Parents experienced more than one of the eight identified conceptions of ECEC services that emerged from the 23 interviews. Furthermore, parents who subscribed to a particular view, or views, of ECEC services may have considered a number of individual factors in choosing services for their young children. This understanding is presented diagrammatically in Figure 1, displaying the subcategories of choice of ECEC services within the dimensions representative of parent understandings of these services.

The model (Figure 1) draws together the findings from both the phenomenographic and the grounded theory analyses. It must be reiterated that each conception of ECEC services exists in relation to the others, as well as in relation to the influences upon the choice of service. Indeed, closer scrutiny of the direction of the arrows in the model illustrates that the influences upon parent choice are encompassed in the boundaries of each of the dimensions of the outcome space. It is understood that the choice of ECEC service is a complex issue juxtaposed with parental conceptions of services and demographic limitations, particularly when their choice of service may be less than their expectation for their child. Therefore, central to the model is the understanding that the ECEC services are located within a societal context. It is proposed that any one understanding, or combination thereof, of ECEC services impacted upon or influenced the choice a parent made.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that parent understandings and choice of ECEC service are shaped and influenced by their social context and the access to services they are provided with. It is clear that, while parents may hold particular conceptions of what an ECEC service should be, and articulate what they would like to be able to access for their child, they may still choose to access a service according to pragmatic considerations. It is postulated that, because of the limited provision of ECEC services in some locations, it is necessary to understand how parent choice of service may be compromised or complicated by the social context. As Vincent et al. (2002) attest, parents sometimes find it difficult to find an ECEC service that ‘fits’ with their most salient conception, as well as meeting pragmatic concerns. So their reasons for choice and their conceptions of the ECEC service may not mediate their decision. Thus it is possible that,
while parents are expressing the importance of one particular conception, other, seemingly antithetical, considerations might also be important to their choice of service. The impact of the social context and its concomitant rules produce choice complexity in terms of what appears to be pragmatic, and should not be underestimated. This research showed the importance of listening to parents, in order to accurately represent this key stakeholder group in future policy and reform initiatives. At the same time, it is evident that the complexities, compromises and pragmatism of parent choice of services need to be understood in relation to local context.

References


When are beliefs just ‘the tip of the iceberg’?  
Exploring early childhood professionals’ beliefs and practices about teaching and learning  
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FEW RESEARCH PROJECTS HAVE captured the voices of childcare professionals about their personal beliefs in relation to teaching and learning. Using a qualitative case study approach with an emphasis on social constructivism, this descriptive study aimed to understand beliefs and practices as part of an underlying system, rather than as separate constructs influencing each other. In this paper I argue that Fish’s (1998) ‘iceberg’ of professional practice could not explain the complexity of the interplay between belief and practices. Further, I argue that, for these professionals, this interplay was closely related to the depth of belief within the individual belief system as understood by Rokeach (1968). The study indicated that Rokeach’s belief system used in conjunction with Fish’s ‘iceberg’ of professional practice provides a deeper understanding of how beliefs are organised within a system and how different levels of beliefs relate to practices differently.

Introduction

THIS PAPER EMANATED FROM an Honours thesis which investigated the interplay between personal beliefs and practices as understood and articulated by three early childhood professionals working in a Victorian childcare centre (Rivalland, 2005). The literature on beliefs proved to be messy and complex, making it very hard to investigate. However, a critical review yielded several conclusions.

There is a body of research which indicates that beliefs are socially and culturally constructed, deeply seated, and resistant to change (Bruner, 1996; Rokeach, 1968), and that implicit beliefs are central to our way of thinking, doing and being (Bruner, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Rokeach, 1968). Rokeach (1968) argued that human beings have numerous beliefs of varying depth and importance, which are organised into a belief system consisting of:

• primitive beliefs which are developed during childhood within the family and social context, and provide the individual with a sense of self and group identity
• authority beliefs which are mainly attributed to religion and other reference groups
• derived beliefs, which comprise beliefs learned from others.

Moreover, Rokeach (1968) argued that the belief system helps individuals to build a sense of ego and group identity:

The total belief system may be seen as an organization of beliefs varying in depth, formed as a result of living in nature and in society, designed to help a person maintain, insofar as possible, a sense of ego and group identity, stable and continuous over time (p. 10).

There is also evidence that practices are guided by ‘the tacitness of the thought process’ (Fish, 1998) and that context is influenced and also influences beliefs and practices, suggesting that beliefs and practices cannot be decontextualised and analysed as separate entities (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Fish, 1998; Goodfellow & Sumion, 2003; Gudmundsdóttir, 2001; Rogoff, 1998).

A significant amount of empirical research has examined the dissonance between theory and practice within early childhood settings, with most literature reflecting an underlying effort to alter teaching practices (Duffy, 1993; Smith, 1997; Snider & Fu, 1990). Most of this research used survey methods; consequently, little was known about the ways teachers articulated their beliefs and the interplay between beliefs and practices

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as understood by these professionals (Edwards, 2003; Ernest, 2001; Pajares, 1992; Charlesworth, Hart, Burts & Hernandez, 1991). The literature also highlighted that, in order to understand the interplay between beliefs and practices, it is important to consider how people make meaning of their reality. Goodfellow and Sumson (2003) argued that beliefs are not only situated within the individual but are also an integral part of the community in which the individual evolves. Further, the authors noted that the early childhood teaching profession has developed into a community with its own language and culture.

In recent years the concept of educational settings as a community of practice has been strongly represented in the literature (Edwards, 2000; Fleer, 2003; Rogoff, 1995, 1998; Wenger, 2000; Wertsch, Alvarez & Rio, 1995). Wenger (2000) argued that ‘communities of practice’ share understanding, values and norms, consequently attributing meaning to ‘language, routines, artefacts, tools, stories, styles’ (p. 229) which are specific to each community. Wenger claimed that, to be competent within a community, one needs to understand the embedded meanings ascribed to these specific tools, rules and values. This community concept is supported by Rogoff, who argued ‘…children take part in activities of their community, engaging with other children and adults in routine and tacit as well as explicit collaboration … and in the process of participation’ (1995, p. 139). However, Edwards (2000) and Fleer (2003) noted that the early childhood community has developed into a ‘closed’ community with its own discourse and rules which ‘has taken a life of its own’ (Fleer, 2003, p. 64), where teachers use a discourse of learning and teaching that is hard to understand from an ‘outsider’s’ point of view. ‘Teachers adopt a discourse where it is difficult to determine what type of learning is being discussed, the nature of the learning and how it is being learnt’ (Kennedy & Ridgway, 2005, p. 48) and ‘are forever recycling old tired knowledge’ (Edwards, 2000, p. 188).

The aim of this study was to describe how three childcare professionals made meaning of their reality and articulated their personal beliefs in relation to teaching and learning. Previous research has not addressed these topics directly, but has explored some related aspects of early childhood professionals’ beliefs.

One group of studies examined the tension between lived experiences and education on theoretical understanding as informing beliefs. Research indicated that past experiences as learners, and personal beliefs, filtered and impacted on the way teachers engage with theoretical knowledge (Pajares, 1992; Raths, 2001). There is also evidence that teachers approach studies with predefined views about teaching and learning (Raths, 2001). It is unclear if these beliefs are a direct result of ‘upbringing or reflection of life experiences or socialization process in school’ (Kennedy, 1997, in Raths, 2001). In a recent study conducted in the United States, Cassidy and Lawrence (2000) observed that the majority of teachers explained their practices as being influenced by the knowledge they acquired through experience as a teacher and/or ‘from personal experience with their children or with their family of origin’ (Cassidy & Lawrence, 2000, p. 202) rather than by education.

Other studies have dealt with the early childhood educators’ conception of curriculum. Edwards (2005) focused on the theoretical informant of curriculum as articulated by two groups of six Australian kindergarten teachers. In New Zealand, Nuttall (2004), using a symbolic interactionist approach, investigated the construct of ‘curriculum’ as defined intersubjectively and enacted by seven childcare educators. Additionally, Nuttall stressed the complexity of group teaching and its impact on curriculum conception within the early childhood context.

**Working definitions**

The complexity of the literature and the ambiguity surrounding ‘beliefs’ as a concept made it hard to investigate. Therefore I opted for a broad definition of the term ‘beliefs’.

I considered beliefs as being developed and constructed from past experiences and maintained in a social context, thus encompassing feelings, knowledge, meaning-making, expectations and assumptions, articulated or not. Therefore I considered beliefs as an accumulated and contested stronghold of personal claims reflected in actions.

I considered the term ‘practice’ as encompassing all observable aspects of professional practice, such as rules, routines, activities and artefacts, as well as the negotiation among partners—the decision-making and the thought process in which teachers engage within their early childhood community.

**Research questions**

This study focused on: (a) investigating the interplay between childcare professionals’ beliefs and practices; (b) investigating how early childhood professionals working in child care articulated and conceptualised their beliefs about teaching and learning.

This study was designed to add to the research field in this area by providing an insight to the personal beliefs and understanding of three childcare professionals.

**Research design and methodology**

A qualitative case study research framework, with an emphasis on social constructivism as epistemological and ontological informant, framed the research questions...
and supported this investigation. This paradigm aims to ‘explicate the ways people in particular settings come to understand … their day to day situations … and bestow patterns of meaning upon them’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 428).

Research location

The research was conducted over a period of three months within a university-based childcare centre in Victoria, and its selection was opportunistic. Clearview is a pseudonym used to identify the centre. The childcare professionals at Clearview had previously contacted Monash University and were engaging in further professional development. They had expressed their interest in being part of a research project.

Clearview was created in the 1980s as a babysitting club for students to care for each other’s children. The centre evolved over the years to meet the families’ needs. It became a registered childcare centre in 1997. At the time of the study a team of seven ran the centre: the centre’s coordinator; the three participants, Eileen, Louise and Millie; and their three assistants.

Ethics

Ethics approval was obtained before going into the field. I handed copies of the information letters to the coordinator, who assumed the responsibility to forward them to parents, informing them of my presence in the centre. In this letter it was made clear that the children would not take part in this study.

Observation methods and data collection

Stage one: Field observations

The first stage consisted of field observations by participants at work within their natural context, focusing on the early childhood professionals’ beliefs and practices. Prior experiences and understanding of the field allowed minimal disturbance to the natural context and relationships between participants and contexts. This was essential, as this research dealt with the subjective views of the participants in relation to their understanding of specific issues. Copies of these observations were handed to the participants for amendments and validation. No participant chose to amend any information provided. These transcripts later provided prompts used during the three in-depth interviews conducted with the participants.

Stage two: Document analysis

Official documents, such as the parents’ handbook, the childcare centre philosophy and participants’ program-planning, provided rich contextual information in relation to the curriculum, discourse and values of the centre. This documentation, combined with the field observations, provided a greater understanding of the reality of the practice.

Stage three: In-depth interviews and prompts

During the third stage, three in-depth audio-recorded interviews were conducted. Data collected during the field observations was used to prompt the participants’ reflection and interpretation of previous situations and actions. Responses highlighted participants’ thinking processes and possible links between beliefs and practices. To provide participants with opportunities to articulate their beliefs and explain their practices, prompts such as observations drawn from my early fieldwork, and photographs of teaching and learning situations provided by participants were used. The data was to prompt in-depth thinking and allowed participants to articulate the thinking behind their practice. Some questions used as prompts during the interview are listed below:

1. Please tell me what made you embrace a career in early childhood.
2. Can you describe a day where you felt fulfilled in your role as an early childhood professional? Can you explain further what exactly the cause of satisfaction was?
3. Look at this photo, as an early childhood professional. What do you think is happening in this picture? Can you explain further why this is important to you?

Additionally, I provided the participants with interview transcripts and obtained confirmation that this data represented their own views, voices and perceptions of any given situation. Edwards (2001) notes the complexity of data-driven analysis, which relies heavily on the researcher’s understanding of the field. All interviews were transcribed and analysed in line with grounded theory techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Method of data analysis

Strauss and Corbin (1998) described grounded theory as a technique which is rooted in the data. Thus the researcher does not start with a preset theory; rather, the theory is built up during the data collection and the data analysis. In this instance, the in-depth audio-recorded interviews, field observations, the program-planning and other prompts—such as photos of teaching and learning situations taken and selected by the participants—provided the bulk of the data. Transcriptions of audio-recorded interviews identified recurrent categories which were systematically coded according to the procedures recommended within the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
Presentation and discussion

The participants

Eileen is a qualified early childhood professional (Diploma of Children Services). At the time of the study, Eileen was the second in charge at Clearview Childcare Centre and the joint coordinator of the nursery/toddlers room. Eileen has been qualified for the past 13 years and has been working at the centre since 1997.

Louise is an early childhood professional who has been working as a qualified childcare professional ( Advance Certificate of Applied Social Science Child Care) for the past 17 years. At the time of the study Louise had been occupying a job-sharing position since 2001, and coordinated the preschool room with the help of Millie.

Millie qualified as an early childhood professional (Diploma of Community Services) in 1998. At the time of the study Millie had been at Clearview since 2003. Millie is the youngest of the three participants and acted as a joint coordinator with Eileen in the nursery/toddler room and Louise in the preschool room.

The participants’ career paths were similar, in that they all shared a love for children. Millie and Louise had been interested in child development from an early age, while Eileen’s passion for her work developed with the births of her own children. All three childcare professionals had been influenced by significant others in their life who mentioned that they had potential or would be good at working with children. All participants had previous experience in child care as non-qualified staff. However, they also presented some variations: Millie and Louise initially thought of child care as a second option, and they were primarily attracted to kindergarten and primary teaching but did not achieve adequate grades to gain access to university, while Eileen decided to embrace a career in child care when her children started their secondary education.

Findings

One striking pattern was that, on one level, childcare professionals’ beliefs were aligned with the centre’s documentation; but, on another level, the specifics of their interpretations were varied, personal and multidimensional. This corresponded to Rokeach’s (1968) beliefs system which indicated that individuals had different beliefs of varying depth and importance and, the more important the level, the more it would affect the belief system and, therefore, practices. In this study, during interviews and data analysis, it became evident that childcare professionals had embodied the community discourse related to their discipline philosophy, and this also confirmed that they had developed cultural practices (Rogoff, Turkonis & Bartlett, 2001). Consequently this supported Rokeach’s (1968, p. 10) argument that individuals have developed a belief system that helps them maintain a sense of self and group identity.

However, in other situations, the variation in interpretation of community discourse was important and reflected underlying tension. This was observed when childcare professionals talked about the use of natural materials as a care and education philosophy. In this instance, two participants seemed to have embodied the beliefs at a deeper level, and this was reflected in their practices; while one participant queried the validity of this philosophy, thus her practices reflected the tension she experienced in her beliefs.

Discipline policy as a community discourse

The three participants, Eileen, Millie and Louise, articulated the belief that redirecting behaviour was an important aspect of their role as early childhood professionals.

Eileen: It’s like indirect planning that you’ve set things in a way that children should be able to come into it and explore and play harmoniously, and I know with certain age groups you’re still going to have to manage that [children’s behaviour].

Millie: I’ve got a belief that we do need to redirect before conflict starts. It’s like when they bring in their toys from home and someone said to me and ... it makes sense to me. When children bring in things, they don’t always want to share it with other children.

Louise: As more a facilitator to help initiate some play if it needs initiating, to redirect when I see things could maybe go in the wrong I try and jump in [redirect the play] before it does.

This shared community discourse could be traced back to the discipline policy stated in the parents’ handbook.

Discipline Policy

Centre staff use positive guidance techniques at all times and provide an environment which ensures behavioural problems/conflicts are avoided. Strategies are discussed during planning sessions should any behavioural issues be occurring.

(Parents’ handbook, p.10, author’s emphasis)

However, this policy did not appear in other official documents displayed and in use at the centre. Nevertheless, the childcare professionals’ enactment and articulation of this policy seem to indicate that life at the centre was regulated around it. This group conformity to the discipline policy seemed also to indicate that staff attributed more importance to
the maintenance of group cohesion than to care and education.

Eileen, Louise and Millie, as well as their assistants, seemed to have internalised and appropriated this philosophy and acted upon it almost routinely at the slightest sign of conflict. I had noted this during my time in the field, suggesting that the childcare professionals at Clearview had developed ‘cultural practices’ (original emphasis) for dealing with conflict. Rogoff, Turkanis and Bartlett (2001) stated that:

‘Cultural practices and traditions that transcend the particular individuals involved, such as expected ways of handling conflicts and interpersonal issues and crises … the relations among the members of the community are multifaceted. ‘Community’ involves relationship among people based on common endeavours—trying to accomplish some things together—with some stability of involvement and attention to the ways that members relate to each other (p. 10, original emphasis).

Therefore one could argue that this community discourse formed part of childcare professionals’ core belief systems as understood by Rokeach (1968, p. 10), who stated that the core of the belief system is resistant to change and consists of deeply seated accepted facts shared by all (e.g. agreed convention articulated via shared discourses).

I observed that this community belief led to constant redirection of children and indicated tension between the deep core beliefs and other articulated beliefs of childcare professionals, such as freedom of choice and respect for children’s rights. Millie highlighted the tension existing between her core beliefs, her practices and the complexity of the context. This tension was not solely Millie’s domain, as it was also articulated by the other two participants during interview time, and I actually observed it being displayed by all during my time in the field.

\textbf{Millie:} Probably, I think the majority of it would be … because what I believe is important for children would be different from someone else’s beliefs. … I suppose I believe in flexibility and therefore I don’t believe in things having to run strict to a time, and I don’t believe in forcing a child to sit for morning tea if they don’t want to sit for morning tea and I don’t believe they have an opportunity to choose, you’ve got to respect their individual choices and preferences, but I do believe, you know, the children need to listen to other children as well, so I believe, I’m very firm on them listening to people’s words, being able to express how they feel, I believe everybody needs to have their own ideas and thoughts and we should listen to them and if someone else wants to do something. Then I think it’s important that the child listen to that, you know, they don’t have to agree but they do need to listen, and there are things we have to do that we don’t necessarily like to do but [pause] and I think I demonstrate that in the way I talk to children as well, you know, it’s important to get down to their level, it’s important to feel open and to recognise their feelings, thoughts and ideas.

The quote below taken from my journal underlines the tension interplayed between Millie’s articulated beliefs and the reality of the context. This quote reflects clearly the ambiguity experienced by childcare professionals when trying to make sense of their reality.

\textbf{The children came in for lunch, one child did not want to comply with the lunch routine and I observed some kind of verbal tug-of-war between the child and Millie who, after using strategies such as ‘I am sad, you are not listening to me’ or ‘come and see what you’ve got for lunch’, was trying to get the child to comply. This negotiation went on until the child complied and sat at the table. During this time Eileen was busy getting the lunches organised. I can feel the tension in the room. The new babies are crying at the top of their lungs and both teachers are trying to attend to everyone.}

This situation highlighted the constant adjustment pattern between childcare professionals’ day-to-day reality and their thought processes, thus indicating the complexity of their practice as well as the misalignment between beliefs and practices. However, it was not the purpose of this study to identify the division between beliefs and practice. Rather, this study aimed to identify the ways early childhood professionals articulated their beliefs and their thought process and made sense of the reality behind their practices.

\textbf{Natural materials as a philosophy and as teaching tools}

These childcare professionals’ articulation of other aspects of their roles as professionals revealed a multidimensional beliefs system (Rokeach, 1968). In this section I will focus on the difference of articulation and the level of impact the notion of ‘nature as a teaching technique’ had on the three participants’ teaching and learning contexts.

Natural material as a teaching tool figured in the centre’s philosophy documents and consequently formed part of the official discourse of the centre. Even though the centre’s official philosophy statement mentioned the importance of natural materials in the teaching and learning context, it was not the centre’s main philosophy but rather one of the elements forming part of a wider philosophy.
At Clearview we aim to provide quality child care on a full-time or part-time basis.

We provide a facility that enables adults to access education, training and employment. As a student organised centre located within a university, we realise that we must accommodate various and flexible childcare options, ranging from part-time to full-time care.

Staff work as a team to provide each child and his/her family with a safe, secure and caring environment in which the child can learn and grow. Our team of carers create an aesthetically and sensory stimulating environment where all areas of development are planned for.

Our program aims to meet the needs of individual children, covering their social, emotional, physical, language and cognitive needs. We believe that children learn through play, therefore we provide a wide range of natural and culturally diverse materials reflecting our multicultural society. Children have the opportunity for open-ended experiences where they create their own learning.

We acknowledge that children come from an ever diversifying and multicultural background and value each child as a member of a group fostering independence, self-esteem, awareness and consideration of others.

Clearview honours diversity and equality by embracing an anti-bias philosophy respecting all individuals regardless of their gender, race, religion and/or intellectual or physical aptitude.

All three participants, without being prompted, decided to talk about the importance of natural materials within their teaching and learning context. Further, I observed that all three seemed to have selected what suited their beliefs from this section of their philosophy statement. In this instance they all focused on natural materials as a teaching tool but decided, consciously or unconsciously, not to mention the importance given to multiculturalism within the same philosophy document.

This position seemed to parallel Nuttall’s findings:

[An] eclectic approach allowed teachers to locate the formalised curriculum models from which they borrowed key terms in relation to their existing practice, without having to change existing practice to conform to any unified curriculum model or construct (2004, p. 68).

While analysing the data it seemed that these childcare professionals not only selected the key terms from official documents but they each interpreted and articulated these terms differently, thus indicating the interplay between beliefs and practices. Moreover, the data seemed to show that, the stronger the belief, the greater the level of interplay exerted on practices.

Eileen articulated and acknowledged that nature formed part of her belief.

**Eileen:** I am real nature girl [laughing]. Nature freak, I’ve got that reputation. But I just think—oh for a start without getting too deep and meaningful, I think our environment is so precious, and I think we have to start early teaching our children about that and I know we did it with our girls; my daughters are now 19 and 23 and they just have an incredible wonderful respect for nature, the environment and for things natural, an appreciation of all those sorts of things that I am putting into my program here … that we can pick up something from the environment and play with it and when we finish we can put it back and things aren’t too disturbed.

In this quote, it seemed that Eileen had not only internalised and appropriated ‘nature’ as a teaching technique, but it had became a way of life she had not only inculcated to her children but was implementing in her work at Clearview. Therefore one could argue that Eileen’s love of nature formed part of her core belief system, as explained in Rokeach (1968), and was at the deep level of Fish’s (1998) ‘iceberg’ of professional practice.

However, Millie and Louise presented two different scenarios, which situated their level of belief in relation to ‘natural materials as a teaching technique’ within the ‘derived beliefs’ of Rokeach’s (1968) belief system. Derived beliefs are learned from others but their development is highly personal, varying from individual to individual. Rokeach argued that the different beliefs within the belief system are connected and, depending on the level and awareness of the belief, the core of the belief system may or may not be affected.

This seemed to be the case for Millie and Louise, who each presented a different level of belief in relation to natural materials as a teaching technique.

**Trish:** If you could create your own centre, what would be your ideal teaching and learning context?

**Millie:** Very similar to what I have here, not a big centre, definitely not a big centre ... I learned a hell of a lot from being here, before I came here it was all about these whiz bang new toys, whereas coming here I’ve been able to really look into a lot of the natural materials; this is a big philosophy here so I would love a centre that had a lot of natural materials in it. Lots of that warm feel. I don’t like plastic things; I prefer wooden toys.

In this quote, Millie acknowledged that she has been...
influenced by Eileen's love of nature, and this strong influence has resulted in Millie's adopting the official community discourse. Millie reinforced the interplay of this derived belief with her own belief system when stating her ideal learning and teaching context.

On the other hand, Louise queried the validity of natural materials as sole activities being proposed to children, as shown in the quote below.

**Louise:** ...and what else, I mean, we have introduced the natural materials as well and I have ... do like the idea of that, but I wouldn't say I dismiss everything else for that ... you know, some people were really 'everything should be more natural materials and get away from plastics’ and all that, but I still think that variety is really important, it spices the world and I think you need to have everything.

One could conclude that Louise's acceptance of this community belief stayed at a superficial level, and she had not yet appropriated nature as a teaching technique. As Louise's beliefs in relation to natural materials were still at a superficial level (Rokeach, 1968), they did not impact as much on her practices. Consequently, this indicated that official discourses are not automatically embodied by childcare professionals and that their impact and alignment with practices would depend on childcare professionals' personal interpretations and acceptance of these beliefs within the core of their beliefs system.

In summary, it appeared that all participants used the community discourse of 'natural materials' which could be traced back to the official documents. However, each participant articulated various interpretations of this term that were personal and multidimensional and reflected deeper personal beliefs.

**Summary of main findings arising from this investigation**

One striking pattern is that, on one level, these childcare professionals seemed to have made an informed decision to apply specific rules that lead to a peaceful working atmosphere within the centre. For example, the discipline policy was not only uniformly applied by all three childcare professionals but also by their assistants. In this study, these professionals seemed to have embodied the community discourse related to their discipline philosophy, and this also confirmed that they had developed cultural practices (Rogoff, Turkanis & Bartlett, 2001), supporting Rokeach's argument (1968, p. 10) that individuals have developed a belief system that helps them maintain a sense of self and group identity.

However, in other situations, the variation in interpretation of community discourse was important and reflected underlying tension. This was observed when these childcare professionals talked about the use of natural materials as a teaching philosophy. In this instance, two participants seemed to have embodied the beliefs at a deeper level and this was reflected in their practices, while one participant queried the validity of this philosophy, thus her practices reflected the tension she experienced in her beliefs.

I argue that, although the beliefs of participants were all present in the 'iceberg' of professional practice, their impact on practices was closely related to the depth of the belief within their individual belief systems. Another important finding was that, although official discourse was used by all, the reality is that these discourses were not automatically appropriated by these childcare professionals, and their impact on practices was dependent on individuals' personal interpretations and level of interconnectedness to their intricate belief systems.

**Conclusion**

This study makes two main theoretical and conceptual contributions to the literature about beliefs and practices in early childhood education. First, this study has presented a case for thinking about beliefs and practices as part of one complex and multidimensional system. Second, this study provides some initial evidence to form the basis for future research examining how and where beliefs develop and change.

This study showed that Rokeach's (1968) belief system used in conjunction with Fish's (1998) 'iceberg' of professional practice allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how beliefs are organised within a system and how different levels of beliefs relate to practices differently. These findings suggest that beliefs, when shared and agreed to, are articulated consistently and are enacted in practice, whereas others not so readily agreed upon are articulated inconsistently or enacted differently across different circumstances. In particular, these findings add to Nuttall's (2004) findings about the need for more research into how professionals maintain a sense of identity and integrity when their beliefs and practices include conflicting or contradictory components. This was found to occur within an individual’s system of beliefs and practices and sometimes within the system of a community of people working together.
The role of meaningful dialogue in early childhood education leadership

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ACTION RESEARCH WAS USED to study the effectiveness of Learning Organisation and Adaptive Enterprise theories for promoting organisation-wide learning and creating a more effective early childhood education organisation.

This article describes the leadership steps taken to achieve shared vision via meaningful dialogue between board, management and staff that encouraged mental models to be revealed and modified as conflicts in deeply held beliefs became reconciled. Consideration of feedback relationships provided valuable systemic insights and a choice of organisation futures. Over time, the new mindset resulted in new infrastructure, policies, training and reward practices that enabled the organisation to compete very successfully against other service providers through a differentiation strategy of quality and responsiveness. Significant and enduring improvement in the self-esteem of empowered individuals was also noted.

The results of this research should be of interest to any leader who needs to radically transform attitudes and beliefs, promote organisation-wide learning, and effectively implement widespread, enduring change.

Background

THE NEW ZEALAND LABOUR Government’s vision is for every child to have the opportunity to participate in quality early childhood education, no matter their circumstances. Its recently published 10-year strategic plan, Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki (Ministry of Education, 2002), outlines approaches intended to increase participation in early childhood education (ECE), improve quality of ECE services, and promote better relationships between those working with children. However, what is barely acknowledged is the uncertainty and stress caused by the introduction of new funding and regulatory systems, and a pay regime (NZEI, 2004) that marginalises untrained staff and risks conflict between long-serving colleagues.

Against such a backdrop an ECE leader might choose to invest in executive coaching and other professional development programs to help him/her comprehend and cope with these challenges. However, likely to be overlooked is one of the most essential skills required of the leader: the ability to expand people’s capacity for high-quality thinking and for creating their own future (Charbit & Kiefer, 2004). This is a critical oversight, especially in times of great change, as it has long been claimed that the capacity to learn faster than the competition may be the organisation’s only sustainable competitive advantage (Senge, 1990).

Several years after Argyris and Schon (1996) first posed the question of how leaders can best promote organisation-wide learning and implement widespread and enduring desirable change, research is continuing within various organisational settings (Sun & Scott, 2003). This paper reports the use of action research with a community-based ECE centre in rural New Zealand, which directly addressed two fundamental research questions:

1. How effective are the Learning Organisation disciplines for assisting the members of an ECE organisation to engage in high-quality thinking and to create their own future?
2. Does the adoption of Adaptive Enterprise principles create a more effective ECE organisation?

Literature

The following section provides a brief review of key Learning Organisation and Adaptive Enterprise theories that will feature in the later action research case study, and justifies the choice of research methodology.
Introduction to the Learning Organisation

According to Senge (1990), a Learning Organisation is organic and has an organisational structure, information system and culture capable of learning from collective experiences to improve decision-making and competitiveness. Learning Organisation concepts embody many of the contemporary notions of good practice in the development of all employees, while simultaneously creating a climate of participation, contribution and support, in which employees are valued and their talents employed for the benefit of the whole organisation (Kelleher, 2002). Learning Organisations may also be distinguished from traditional, authoritarian, controlling organisations by mastery of a set of interrelated ‘disciplines’ (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994):

- **Personal Mastery**—the discipline of continuously clarifying and deepening personal vision.
- **Mental Models**—the discipline of continually challenging ingrained assumptions and generalisations that influence understanding of the world and one’s actions.
- **Building Shared Vision**—a discipline for translating individual vision into shared vision.
- **Team Learning**—a discipline that builds on genuine dialogue and is vital if the organisation is to learn.
- **Systems Thinking**—a conceptual, intuitive framework used to knit together the other disciplines and provide the organisation with a global view.

A feature underpinning all the Learning Organisation disciplines is that individuals engage in *meaningful dialogue*; meaning they reflect on, expose, test and improve the mental models upon which they rely in facing difficult problems (Senge, 1990). Dialogue is considered to take a team beyond any single individual’s understanding by exploring what may be complex issues from many points of view. Bohm and Peat (1987) identified three basic conditions necessary for dialogue: participants must reveal their assumptions for questioning and observation; participants must regard one another as colleagues in a mutual quest for deeper insight and clarity; and there must be an experienced facilitator who takes part in the dialogue and holds its context.

Today, many organisations continue to suffer from a range of learning disabilities, including focusing exclusively on situations and problems that are close to home; rewarding employees (almost) solely for managing their department while being effectively blind to issues in other departments; and operating as if the next quarter were the finish line. This creates a tendency for leaders and other decision-makers to solve problems rather than creating something new and meaningful: ‘If your primary role is to fix problems … it’s hard to maintain a sense of organisation purpose’ (Senge, 2003, p. 4).

Introduction to the Adaptive Enterprise

If changes in an organisation’s external environment occur gradually, a sensible management approach would stress efficiency in doing what management knows should be done, forecasting demand and minimising the cost of producing the goods or service. This is the traditional firm-forward or ‘Make-and-Sell’ organisation, depicted in Figure 1. In this organisation the leader’s primary responsibility is to establish a ‘static’ high-level business strategy and a closed command and control system to ensure follow-through.

![Figure 1. Traditional organisation, from Haeckel (1999)](image)

**Figure 1. Traditional organisation, from Haeckel (1999)**

In contrast, if external change is imposed or it occurs rapidly or discontinuously, Haeckel (1999) claims that adaptiveness must take precedence over efficiency so that premiums will flow to organisations that can sense early and accurately what customers want, and can respond in ‘real-time’ to those needs (see Figure 2). In this so-called Adaptive Enterprise the leader’s primary responsibility is to create an organisational context that unambiguously establishes what the organisation does and the constraints on how it does it, and updates this in response to external and internal signals (Haeckel, 1999). As long as employees perform within the parameters defined by the context, the organisation empowers them to determine for themselves how best to deliver the results for which they have been made accountable. Haeckel (1999) notes, however, that traditional organisations cannot simply bolt-
on adaptiveness as yet another capability; adaptive organisations need a fundamentally new structure and must manage information in new ways and be managed as a system.

Research method

Action research methodology was chosen for the study because it involves the researcher working with members of an organisation over a matter that is of genuine concern to them, and action is intended to be taken based on the intervention(s). It is a methodology that has the dual aims of action and research; action to bring about change in some community, organisation or program, and research to increase understanding on the part of the researcher (Dick, 2000). The iterative action research cycle consists of, at least, planning (or intention), action and review (or critique). This model provides a mix of responsiveness and rigour, thus meeting both the action and research requirements. Repeated cycles allow the researcher to converge on appropriate conclusions (Dick, 2000).

Action research methods were judged particularly appropriate to maximise the flexibility and responsiveness of the research to the ECE organisation’s changing external environment, while also allowing the researcher to fully participate in the organisation. As a chief motivation was a strong commitment to participation and equity, and understanding how interpersonal relationships and system dynamics interact to undermine or produce effectiveness, participative approaches and action science methodologies were selected (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Dick, 2000). In particular, Checkland’s (1981) soft systems methodology was used to execute the action research; here critical reflection is a key component of the ‘plan, act and review’ research cycle, in order to justify the interpretations and assumptions made during the research. The majority of the research was conducted using these action research methods, supported by data from recorded formal and informal interviews. Views and perceptions expressed during the interviews were assessed for reliability by seeking responses from several personalities, and ‘factual’ statements were also triangulated, where possible, by referring to internal documentation and the relevant literature (Dick, 1999). The next section describes the interventions.

Case study findings

Background to the organisation

Action research over an eight-year period involved a community-based, full-day ECE centre (Centre) located in rural New Zealand and registered by the Ministry of Education. By the mid-1990s government funding cuts had become a major issue, resulting in fewer community centres and a corresponding increase in privately owned centres. Interestingly, this was at a time when demand for childcare services was forecast to increase on the back of higher employment following the economic stagnation of the 1980s and a strong world economy. An increasingly full-time-employed and more discerning customer base was thus less able to be involved in traditional fundraising activities, while at the same time demanding quality ‘edu-care’ services for its children.

Within the Centre, information overload and escalating Ministry reporting requirements, plus a tendency for management to think locally and short-term, appeared to be contributing to poor management decision-making and encouraging employees to feel they were powerless victims of ‘the system’. This situation presented an ideal opportunity for the author to use action research to assess the effectiveness of Learning Organisation theory and Adaptive Enterprise theory in an ECE setting.

Centre description and governance

At the outset of the research in 1995 the Centre employed a coordinator, two supervisors and nine full-time teaching staff, plus a small army of part-time relievers who provided all-day care for 46 children aged up to five years. Although the under-twos unit was a recent addition, the larger over-twos unit was very dilapidated, as were the outside learning environments.

The author had been elected to the Trust Board (Board) late in 1994 which, at the time, comprised 10 local employers and sporting personalities who appeared to have very fixed ideas about child care. At the monthly
management meetings. Statements were regularly made along the lines of ‘If we offer child care parents will always come’ and ‘We are a community-based centre so we need to keep fees to a minimum, and that determines what we can spend on the Centre and on staff’ (Board Minutes, 07.10.94). Trustees felt the Centre was doing fine and seemed unconcerned about the state of the shabby buildings and the possible impacts of a smart new ECE centre that was about to open in the town.

Teaching staff, in contrast, appeared to have very low self-esteem and to lack pride in the organisation and in their chosen profession; their working day was long and stressful, the Board appeared to have a penny-pinching attitude towards them, and pay rates were poor. On one occasion, when staff were earning NZ$9 per hour on average, they asked for a raise of 30 cents. Even though the Board could afford this amount, they immediately offered ‘15 cents, take it or leave it’ (Staff Interview 3, 19.02.95). Some parents treated staff as paid babysitters rather than as teaching professionals and would verbally abuse them, and although a new Centre coordinator had aspirations to provide more and better services, basic care was what the Board had traditionally supported.

Decision-making by managers at all levels appeared to be ad hoc and focused on fire-fighting immediate problems; office procedures involved fairly primitive manual systems, and it became increasingly clear that major changes in the mindsets of both the Board and staff would be needed if the organisation was to stand up to the new competition. On a more positive note, the Ministry had begun to offer more grants to help cover the costs of teacher training and was strongly hinting at rewarding centres that could demonstrate quality practices and compliance with the Early Childhood Education Charter Guidelines. Competitive discretionary grants were also available to fund up to 80 per cent of the construction/refurbishment costs of community-based ECE centres.

Creating a climate for change
In the face of the Board’s refusal to acknowledge the new competition or to compete for quality funding, serendipity in the form of rapid turnover at Board level was to provide the opportunity to re-envision the Centre’s future. The opportunity for the author to take on the chairperson role was provided by the election of a new treasurer in early 1995, followed in mid-year by the resignation of the trust chairperson and several longstanding trustees. Given a changing external environment, including the threat of new competition and working parents’ heightened expectations, the immediate leadership role was perceived to be a catalyst for change, to help the whole management/employee team define its shared vision and to ultimately help shape policy to achieve a desirable future.

Early activities by the author in this lead role involved much observation and regular meetings with the new Centre coordinator. This took a while because the questions being asked could provoke defensive reactions, so needed to be handled sensitively. The initial approach was to ask simple closed questions such as: ‘Do you think that your staff would be interested in this [initiative]?’ or ‘Do you think that your staff would be capable of doing this [activity]?’ Soon the questions were more open-ended and used to introduce new ideas. ‘Do you think if we did this [initiative] that this [desirable result] might happen?’

A growing confidence by the coordinator brought forth statements such as, ‘Maybe now is the time for the managers to be proactive, instead of us all acting as if we are victims of the system and worrying about a fashy new centre opening, being angry that the local council is not being supportive, being frustrated that the buildings need paint but we don’t have the money … I think we now have enough confidence to go together to the staff with proposals to turn this organisation around.’ The key question was perceived to be, ‘Is it possible to fire-up the team sufficiently so that they will want to fulfil a vision they have helped to create, and which they will own on behalf of the whole community?’ Thus, organisation-wide visioning was planned to be the focus of the first major ‘Plan, Act, Review’ cycle of the action research.

(1) Learning Organisation initiative description
It was important to address the absence of a compelling vision to entice the whole team because the organisation lacked an overall sense of purpose; routine tasks were being done but little that was particularly new or meaningful had been attempted for a long time by management or staff.

At this point, the recently published Learning Organisation literature was consulted (Senge et al., 1994), which appeared to recommend working with a single team (comprising all managers, trustees and teaching staff) to enhance everyone’s mental models of their ‘ECE world’. While it was judged that the teaching staff ought to be receptive to any initiative that held out the possibility of more pay, it was possible that some could be overwhelmed intellectually or emotionally, either because they lacked the confidence to engage with the planned tasks or because they remained mistrustful of the Board’s true intentions.

Deep learning—building shared vision through dialogue
In light of these concerns, the aim of the author in mid-to late-1996 (acting in the dual roles of trust chairperson and dialogue facilitator) was to have the team become progressively engaged with all of the Learning Organisation disciplines. These disciplines represented the state-of-art of Learning Organisation best practice, which essentially meant the team would be in largely uncharted territory. First, the coordinator was encouraged to articulate her
personal vision and her vision for the organisation, which prompted the realisation of the need to provide the wider team with clear written explanations of the aims of the exercises, the principles of meaningful dialogue, jargon terms being used, and so on.

Before the first shared visioning session everyone was asked to write down and keep private the answers to a set of questions concerning their personal vision of the organisation three–five years in the future. Questions included:

- What would you personally like to see your organisation become, for its own sake?
- What kind of customers would it have?
- What range of activities might it conduct?
- What reputation would it have?
- What contribution would it make?

Participants were also asked to consider the question, ‘If you had this sort of organisation, what would it bring you and how would it allow your personal vision to flourish?’ The aim was to move everyone as quickly as they felt comfortable into a space where everyone’s personal visions were being used collectively as the basis for the shared organisation vision—a superior visioning process called ‘co-creating’ (Senge et al., 1994, p. 322). The author/facilitator stressed right from the beginning that this was ‘a unique opportunity for management and staff team to create its own very special workplace together, as employers are not generally in the habit of consulting employees like this’.

During four (two-hour) sessions a range of questions was debated, including:

- Who are the stakeholders of this organisation three–five years from now?
- What are the most influential trends in our industry?
- What is our image in the marketplace?
- What is our unique contribution to the world around us?
- What is the impact of our work?
- How do we make money?

**Dialogue difficulties**

Engaging in meaningful dialogue takes work and persistence. Initially, some staff reported they thought it very strange to be asked what they wanted for themselves and for the sake of the organisation; no employer had ever asked them before and the questions seemed difficult to answer. Other staff thought it would be a waste of time and felt it was not their job to manage the Centre. However, once people realised what was trying to be achieved, the initial misgivings gave way to an attitude of, ‘What have we got to lose; why not give it a try?’ Everything discussed was recorded so that absentees could read the notes and have their say at the next meeting. Soon everyone was making the effort to be there: ‘It is exciting to talk about new buildings and better working conditions’ (Staff Interview 11, 12.09.96).

Critically, the team found itself at a watershed in its thinking when the need for effective top-level business strategies, to counter threats in a competitive environment, conflicted with the traditional view held by some staff of their organisation as a passive and benevolent non-commercial ‘charity’: one dependent on the support and goodwill of low-paid workers and supported by grants, donations and voluntary effort. This potential for conflict between the deeply held beliefs of trustees, managers and teachers was handled by a combination of reflection and inquiry techniques, simultaneously questioning the validity of the givens and assumptions that were driving current practices. The so-called ‘left-hand column’ technique (Argyris & Schon, 1996) was found to be particularly valuable; by inviting team members to write down on the same sheet of paper what they had said (and what they were thinking when they were saying it), the givens and assumptions became observable for inspection and discussion, and members began to appreciate how their own mental models were getting in the way of a true dialogue.

This was reported by several members of the Board as, ‘quite a scary time’, as there was always the possibility that the dialogue might be leading the organisation towards a destination that would be a potential commercial disaster (Trustee Interview 8, 23.11.96). Yet, if Bohm and Peat’s (1987) conditions for meaningful dialogue were to be met, there was no choice for the Board members but to reveal assumptions for questioning and observation and to treat teachers and managers as colleagues in a ‘mutual quest for deeper insight and clarity’.

Considerable efforts by the team produced the following organisation vision statement:

**XXX aims to be the leader in early childhood care and educational services in New Zealand by setting an example of exemplary practice and service.**

The accompanying mission statement was:

**XXX will provide a quality one-stop early childhood education and care facility to meet the needs of all parents/carers, children and families and the wider community.**

While these statements of intent were extremely important and would certainly lead the organisation into new territory, considerable additional value accrued to the organisation when staff demeanour dramatically improved; people who until recently had been very despondent appeared to gain confidence and become energised and willing to engage with the exercises at a deep and personal level.
Deeper learning—application of systems thinking

Having created a fired-up team where everyone was enthusiastic about the vision they had helped to create, the question that quickly arose was, ‘What do I need to do now to make a start on achieving our vision?’

Rather than inviting relatively uninformed and competing opinions, the author decided to help the team understand the systemic structures underlying the organisation’s operations, and the nature of the high-leverage actions (maximum return for least cost/effort) available to the organisation. A well-established modelling technique called System Dynamics was chosen for this task (Forrester, 1961), which is a theory of the structure of systems and their resulting dynamic behaviour. Here, structure includes not only the physical aspects of activities and equipment but also, importantly, the tangible and intangible policies and traditions that dominate decision-making. Because system behaviour is assumed to be determined by feedback in the system, so-called ‘causal loop’ diagrams can be used to stimulate discussion of the impacts (both intended and unintended) of potential actions and decisions. This also allows risk-free experimentation with competing management policies.

Proposed use of the model dictated that it should be capable of informing the team about the dynamics of ‘their’ system and of high-leverage interventions lying within their span of control. Detailed discussions with the coordinator agreed upon the main elements of feedback in the system and led to the causal loop diagram in Figure 3. This shows three basic feedback loops (closed sequences of linear causes and effects) as well as the four main elements of ‘Demand for Services’, ‘Net Available Finance’, ‘Level of Service’ and ‘Perceived Image’, and the interactions between them; significant delays in the system are also indicated.

The causal loop diagram clearly indicated that Perceived Image should be the main leverage point for the management team to focus on to stimulate service demand. Hence, after much discussion, the whole team agreed the organisation should:

- increase the amount spent on advertising
- up-skill existing teachers as soon as possible and employ more (trained) teachers in the future, in order to reduce overall workloads
- carefully consider the financial implications of a total refurbishment of the Centre
- raise fees to help cover the increased costs of investing in these areas, so as to achieve break-even profitability (until the beneficial impacts of the other initiatives began to flow).

Under this new regime, not only would the Centre need to appear to ooze quality, but it would need to be conscious of changing client needs and be prepared to respond to them immediately. Nobody was under the illusion that the journey would be easy, as a situation analysis had revealed a stable financial situation but with little room to manoeuvre. An over-supply of childcare services in the district was forecast to increase in the short term, and the historically low fees being charged (ostensibly) as a community-based organisation had restricted the organisation’s ability to invest in staff training or to offer industry-collective pay rates. On the other hand, although the client base was less available to fundraise, it was generally supportive and aware of the rising cost of living expenses.

Achieving the vision

Following close on the heels of the shared vision dialogue, the organisation’s name was changed to emphasise its focus on preschool education, rather than just child care; the staff-training program was
accelerated; and planning began in earnest for the expansion and total refurbishment of the Centre and its child-centred learning environments. As well, an intense campaign was launched to tell parents and the wider community about Centre achievements and the intentions for the service.

It was judged vital that the team remain engaged with the dialogue. For example, staff had a major input to the building refurbishment design, both to maintain dialogue momentum and to ensure shared ownership; they visited exemplar centres to record best practices and observe learning environments. This knowledge was incorporated into the architect’s preliminary plans, which were then modelled into a 3D virtual environment which the staff could ‘walk through’ and make further suggestions on. Following a successful Ministry of Education discretionary grant application in 1999, all the buildings and learning environments were refurbished in 2000. Staff were delighted with the final design that surpassed expectations, and were especially proud because they had been closely involved at all of the planning stages.

(2) Responsive organisation initiative description

The shared vision dialogue had also highlighted the need for a more flexible form of organisation to achieve a quality differentiation strategy and meet changing demands. The second major ‘Plan, Act, Review’ action research cycle was initiated when staff took possession of the refurbished buildings; at about the same time Adaptive Enterprise theory first came to the author’s attention.

According to Haeckel (1999), creating organisational context consists of three elements: a reason for being, governing principles, and a high-level business design. The earlier Learning Organisation (visioning) work had actually discussed the first two of these in some detail, generating several statements including:

Reason for being:

The primary purpose of the XXX Early Learning Centre is to serve the local community, and to achieve this by preparing its young people for school and instilling in them: social skills, a sense of respect, values and positive self-esteem.

Governing principles:

The XXX Early Learning Centre will always:
• put quality service and the needs of the community before profit
• value the needs and the wellbeing of its staff.

The XXX Early Learning Centre will never:
• turn away a needy child
• withhold from parents the information they are entitled to.

These context statements define a range of permissible staff actions and contrast with the more usual detailed sets of staff instructions on what to do, when, and how to do it. The Board attempted to reinforce the context with a range of related personnel initiatives designed to:
• empower accountable employees to make decisions and to act without the need to constantly refer to senior staff for direction
• support employees with enhanced training opportunities and time for reflection away from the floor
• reward staff who volunteer to work on Centre projects in their own time for the benefit of the whole team.

Haeckel (1999) also advocates that adaptive organisations put in place modular adaptive activity capabilities that can be ‘endlessly reconfigured’ to meet varying customer demands. However, in recognition of the repetitive nature of many of the day-to-day Centre activities, this type of high-level business design was not judged necessary for the organisation.

Organisation present status

During the five years following its refurbishment, the Centre has gone from strength to strength. It is now highly respected within the ECE sector in New Zealand for its innovative organisation design and management and teaching practices. In 2003 the Education Review Office reported very favourably on the quality of the management/staff team, its strategic direction, its ‘exemplary’ personnel practices, its learning environments, and the range of services offered.

Staff turnover is extremely low; generous professional development opportunities and (creative) compensation arrangements that exceed the provisions of the industry-collective agreement make the organisation a desirable place to work. Systems and policies ensure staff are treated with respect and have complete Board support at all times. The continuing non-negotiable emphasis on quality and professionalism ensures that, in contrast to many other centres, most of the teachers are fully registered and receive ongoing professional development, and the organisation is able to access additional quality funding from government.

Parents’ views are canvassed frequently so that the organisation can respond very rapidly to concerns and to requests for information and service, and the enabling office support systems are robust and predominantly automated.

The Centre’s reputation has resulted in sizeable waiting lists and this, plus the hands-off approach to staff management, has led to dramatic improvements in the self-esteem of empowered individuals; their confidence
and pride has continued to grow as the Centre’s reputation has become recognised. A custom-built 30-place facility for three-and-a-half to five-year-olds, designed by the team, opened its doors in August 2006.

Discussion

This paper has helped address an overall lack of practical implementation guidelines to inform and motivate individuals in organisations facing large-scale changes, such as are becoming common in the New Zealand ECE sector. This research was fundamentally concerned with two research questions:

1. How effective are the Learning Organisation disciplines for assisting the members of an ECE organisation to engage in high-quality thinking and to create their own future?

2. Does the adoption of Adaptive Enterprise principles create a more effective ECE organisation?

An action research study involved two major interventions in a not-for-profit ECE community organisation whose leader had recognised the need to become more responsive to customer needs in a changing external environment. Regarding the first research question, sustained meaningful dialogue between the members of the organisation drew on all of the Learning Organisation disciplines. Systemic insights served to challenge existing views and deeply held beliefs that lay at the root of strategy formulation and helped reconcile business performance measures with core concerns, such as quality of child education and care, teacher morale, and the organisation as a community asset. A shared vision of the organisation’s ideal future state resulted over time in a new infrastructure, policies, training and reward practices that enabled the organisation to compete successfully against other service providers through a differentiation strategy of quality and responsiveness. Marked improvement in the self-esteem of empowered individuals was also noted.

Regarding the second research question, Haeckel (1999) claimed that organisations desiring to compete by sensing early and responding rapidly to customers’ varying demands must have employees that are empowered and encouraged to act autonomously. These features of an adaptive organisation were successfully transferred into the host organisation. An accepted company context (unambiguous purpose and bounds) was found extremely valuable for empowering individuals and enabling them to adapt independently to varying customer demands; to a large extent context and coordination replaced a command and control structure. Modular adaptive capability as recommended by Haeckel (1999) was not judged necessary for this particular ECE organisation.

Conclusions

Adaptive Enterprise theory and Learning Organisation theory are complementary, the first requiring, and the other fostering, autonomous and empowered individuals through organisation-wide learning. This research has shown that even teams using Learning Organisation principles for the first time can successfully utilise systems modelling to encourage meaningful dialogue and to envision high-leverage futures.

Given the increasingly volatile and complex business environments being experienced by contemporary organisations, the results of this research should be of interest to any leader who needs to radically transform attitudes and beliefs, promote organisation-wide learning, and effectively implement widespread and enduring change. As evidenced by the case study, the benefits that can accrue to the organisation that engages in meaningful dialogue include:

- a continuing, non-negotiable emphasis on quality and professionalism where stakeholders are canvassed often so that the organisation can respond rapidly to concerns and to requests for information and service
- innovative design of the organisation and its management and employee practices
- dramatic improvements in the self-esteem of empowered individuals and a confidence and pride in the organisation and the profession
- low staff turnover in a competitive job market
- systems and policies that ensure all staff are treated with respect and have support at all times.

While acknowledging the difficulty of separating initiative impacts from other factors when assessing changes in company effectiveness, there appeared to be strong correlation and improvements in both tangible and intangible measures of organisation performance. Of course, reliance on a single case study to support theories and models is a limitation of the methodology; just three of the factors from the case situation that may have impacted the successful outcome are:

- excellent senior-level sponsorship and scope of authority for the project
- the leader was an outsider, not bound by accepted organisational givens and norms
- individuals were already feeling pain, so the team was relatively receptive to new ideas.

Advice for ECE leaders

ECE leaders contemplating engaging their own organisation in meaningful dialogue are encouraged to reflect on the following 10 points, which are distilled from several cycles of action research conducted by
the author over some 12 years as an ECE leader and action researcher:

1. It can be scary for a leader to involve employees in a frank and objective discussion of the organisation, where it is currently headed and how it is doing, as there is the possibility this dialogue might point the organisation towards a destination that promises to be a commercial disaster, or might expose the leader to criticism.

2. It is vital for the leader not to rush into the initiative before taking a close look at the organisation's governance arrangements, internal culture, key personalities, financial and competitive situation, and state of staff morale. Timing is everything; resist the temptation to make rushed decisions, despite the fact that it is often easier to convince the team of the need for change when the organisation is not faring well.

3. Provide the team with clear written explanations of the aims of the various dialogue exercises, principles of meaningful dialogue, common jargon terms being used etc.

4. Resistance is normal, so be sure to present the visioning/dialogue exercises to the team as a rare opportunity to create a very special working environment, which will (at the very least) make their contribution feel more meaningful.

5. When working towards agreeing on the organisation vision, endeavour to engage the whole team in a meaningful dialogue where everyone's voice is clearly heard, in order that everyone's personal visions are being used collectively as the basis for a shared vision.

6. Do not try to rush through the Learning Organisation disciplines or some team members will be left behind; the aim is to have everyone (trustees, managers, teachers...) engaged in a meaningful dialogue about a range of possible futures and to take joint ownership of tactical decisions that will move the organisation closer to realising the team’s vision.

7. Be sure to benchmark key organisation activities against the best in class, including how the best organisations in other commercial sectors are doing them, and then try to improve on the best. This can boost morale and yield great improvement ideas.

8. Help everyone in the team to appreciate how their choices and actions affect their organisation ‘system’ (favourably and unfavourably) and be sure to identify the ‘high leverage’ points—maximum benefit for least cost/effort.

9. Achieving enduring change takes time; quick fixes offer the illusion of change.

10. Above all, be aware that some deeply held beliefs will be confronted head-on and that genuine empathy is needed; ECE leaders are not obliged to be fond of their colleagues, but it sure does help!

Acknowledgements

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References


Storytelling as a means of reflecting on the lived experience of making curriculum in teacher education

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(The authors would like it noted that this is one of several papers written collaboratively and the order of authorship is alternated.)

THIS PAPER DESCRIBES HOW REFLECTING on our stories of teacher education practices facilitated a deepening appreciation of our impact on the quality of students’ learning in a tertiary institution. In this paper, our description, analysis and re-interpretation of our experiences exemplify an effective approach for improving how we go about teaching teachers. Storytelling was the tool used to enable the authors to deepen their understanding of teacher-educator practices and promote a scholarly approach to curriculum development.

Part 1: Understanding storytelling as reflection and method

Storytelling as reflection
As teacher educators, academics, women, colleagues and friends, we found that our everyday life was complex, as we intersected with one another in different relationships for different purposes and intentions. Such interactions and relationships were given meaning by the discourses that circulated in different settings. The busy-ness of our lives had structure and meaning that was understood by others and by us because of the shared beliefs and values that circulated in those settings. Such inter-subjectivity occurred at an unconscious level and is part of what Giddens (1991) calls ‘practical consciousness’: the knowledge people use reflexively to make sense of their surroundings and actions in order to continue to act within accepted norms. Reflection, for us, became a way of foregrounding these unconscious rules and norms, and a means of subjecting them to critique so that our practices became more coherent and informed. Essentially, reflection allows individuals to ‘step back’ from their day-to-day practice so they can see, and think about, those practices from new and different perspectives. However, reflection implies more than just thinking...
about, analysing, evaluating or contemplating teaching. As Parker (1997) points out, ‘reflective teaching is a technical term with a quite particular meaning which cannot be assumed straightforwardly to emerge from everyday notions of thinking and reasoning’ (p. 8). Embroiled as we were in the constant juggling of teaching demands and researching pressures, we found it necessary to provide a structure to help focus and guide our reflective activity.

Storytelling recognises that stories are central to how we experience and make meaning of the world around us. We tell stories about our experiences, and it is through those stories that we can understand such experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Stories help capture the complexity of human life and weave together the disparate parts into meaningful events (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). Stories do more than just relay experience. They are essential in rendering experience as meaningful in the first place (Gudmundsdóttir, 1996; Riessman 2002).

Telling and making sense of stories becomes an important mechanism for reflecting on teaching and learning. In writing our stories, and following a stage-by-stage analysis, we have distanced ourselves from our experiences and can re-view them from other perspectives. This intention—to describe and explain the deliberate and purposeful exploration of our practices as teacher educators through a storytelling method for the purpose of demonstrating practice which may be of use to others—is the raison d’être of this paper.

**Storytelling as method**

McDrury and Alterio (2002) provide a useful structure to link analysis of stories with reflection. They outline the process as involving **story finding** (noticing), **story telling** (making sense), **story expanding** (making meaning), **story processing** (working with meaning) and **story reconstructing** (transformative learning). Alterio and McDrury (2003) have used storytelling as a tool to engage students in a reflective process that enables deep and constructive learning to take place. Different levels of engagement, by both the storyteller and the listener, are important to move from the mere description of the story to reflection and transformation. As a tool for understanding our own practice, we have taken the storytelling method to analyse our experiences.

The initial step, **story finding**, recognises that in the messiness of everyday life any number of stories could be, and are, told. Our larger story, which encompasses a range of smaller stories that we go in some part to explain here, began in 2001. It is essentially the story of two colleagues who undertook to improve student learning through reflecting on practice as teacher educators. As McDrury and Alterio (2002) have noted, **story finding** involves becoming sensitive to the stories that are going on in the settings we live in, and being selective about which are worth telling and reflecting on. Initially we selected what we have called ‘formal stories’. These formal stories included a review of the literature germane to early childhood teachers’ subject content knowledge and explored the philosophical underpinning of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996).

This formal storyline was only one way of representing our involvement with developing curriculum. We took a scholarly approach to analysing the field of early childhood teacher education which enabled us to understand the context within which we were working and, in turn, assisted us in the development of the curriculum we were proposing for undergraduate early childhood student teachers. The next storyline was our lived experience of developing and teaching the curriculum.

**Story telling** is the next stage in this process and is where sense is made of experiences through their capture in journals, discussions, written and verbal comments and review. The storytellers select which elements are included and which aspects are emphasised or glossed over. We had decided to write our versions of how we approached the curriculum development and the teaching and learning as a way to unravel and scrutinise our practices as teachers. We hoped that in the **story expanding** stage elements that we had told, as much as those we had overlooked, would be scrutinised.

The third phase, **story expanding**, involves taking the initial, individual accounts and then expanding them, primarily to articulate feelings with the purpose of enabling the tellers and the listeners to ask questions and seek clarification (McDrury & Alterio, 2002). In seeking an audience to listen to our stories, and in order to clarify our own understanding of them, we used our students’ formal and informal evaluations of their experiences of the curriculum they had participated in. We also asked colleagues to read and ask questions of our written stories so that we could create a more accurate and reflective version of the story. By seeking a range of listeners we were able to balance the highly subjective nature of what we were trying to achieve.

The fourth phase involves **story processing**. Here the tellers actively reflect on their expanded story to gain new meanings. Further alternative perceptions are sought and viewed as opportunities to reflect critically on understandings and perceptions. We continued to work collaboratively to unravel our own stories of curriculum development and, concurrently, we created a mutual and shared story of our work together. At this point we were able to evaluate a range of possible solutions and resolutions which had emerged from students, critical friends and peers through the review process. This changed and transformed our implicit and
tactit ways of knowing and led to further stories being told, examined and restructured.

The intention of this section of the paper has been to provide a framework for the reconstructed story of our experience of developing, teaching and reflecting on one story of curriculum development. It must be stated that in reality this was not a linear process. Our thoughts, discussions and reflections were never so straightforward nor sequenced in such an orderly fashion. While we have outlined the stages sequentially, the nature of our collaboration as teachers, teacher educators and researchers has meant that we engaged in our storytelling at a number of levels simultaneously. What follows in Part 2 is one of the stories that emerged from our reflecting. It cannot, because of space restrictions, include all that we discovered about ourselves.

**Part 2: A story of curriculum making**

We had been appointed to positions in an education faculty of a newly established university and were expected to contribute to the three-year early childhood Bachelor of Education degree. The program was designed to educate early childhood student teachers to the standards required to provide quality care and educative outcomes for young children as proposed by the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s 10-year strategic plan (Ministry of Education, 2002). We were also expected to contribute to the developing research culture and to undertake ‘research’. Although we both had extensive experience in teacher education, neither of us had significant backgrounds in early childhood teacher education. We turned to the literature but found few answers as to what subject matter was important in this context and what pedagogical strategies were considered most effective. As Berry (2004) has pointed out, the number of senior academics directly involved in teacher preparation at the undergraduate level is comparatively few. We discovered to our consternation that:

> Because it is not the direct concern of those most able, or encouraged to research it, teacher education remains predominantly in the hands of those least experienced in writing and research … This means that researchers who do write about teacher education may well be disconnected from the practice context and driven by concerns that are different from those who work within it (Berry, 2004, p. 1297).

We were both struggling to overcome what we considered to be a gaping deficit in our own professional understanding of what student teachers needed to know and how they might be best engaged in learning within an early childhood curriculum.

The early childhood curriculum development process we pursued was related specifically to one of several modules for which we had assumed joint responsibility. It had as its focus the nexus between subject content knowledge and the requirements of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). We sought information about the aims of the module, what had previously been taught, and how previous cohorts of students had responded to the teaching. We were told it had been taught in a traditional lecture style of ‘show and tell’, with some interaction.

From our previous experience in teacher education, we wanted to model practices that would underpin the understandings the student teachers were developing. We positioned our constructivist principles within an interpretive framework with an emphasis on meaning and understanding. Literature in science education which detailed the importance of students’ prior knowledge was accessed (e.g. Fleer & Hardy, 2001; Osborne & Freyberg, 1985). We wanted to contrast the previously more instructional approach with a more participative learning setting, believing that this could also encourage and empower our students to do likewise in early childhood settings (Bibby, 1999; Fink, 2003). We adopted a project approach as an instructional device, and each of us developed a self-contained mini-unit which also allowed us to teach to our strengths. Each mini-unit was a self-contained project with a discrete set of outcomes that sat underneath the overall aims of the module.

Individually, we had each foregrounded a major issue and concern that had been revealed through analysing others’ work in early childhood curriculum and our own professional experiences as curriculum experts in science and the arts. For example, Dawn’s concern was that students appeared to lack understanding of science concepts, as evidenced by poor diagnostic test results and their inability to predict with any accuracy what they did or did not know. On the other hand, Belinda aspired to develop students’ personal confidence in the creative arts in order to encourage them to do the same with young children.

Our initial success with the students encouraged us to detail what we had done (see Garbett & Yourn, 2002; Garbett & Tynan, 2004). We realised that there were aspects of each other’s practice that needed clarification and expansion. As we looked inside each other’s projects it became apparent that, while on the surface students were generally pleased with what they had experienced, we had an increasing number of questions. We had several different sources of information available to us, such as quantitative data we had collected through an institutional questionnaire...
at the completion of our projects; qualitative data from student feedback via survey and discussion groups during and after the module; and informal feedback during and after lessons. However, the data did not provide us with enough information to answer our questions about how the teaching had impacted on the student outcomes and our intentions.

Students emphasised in their responses that they liked the practical ‘hands-on work’ best. They felt the module was ‘useful’, as it provided the opportunity to develop resources, and they ‘gained ideas for teaching resources’ and ‘new skills’ for use in early childhood settings. Other students also stated that having a variety of lecturers gave students ‘different ways of thinking’. Some students noted the opportunity to communicate freely with classmates in a ‘stress-free’ environment, ‘enjoying the diversity of learning in the projects’ and the ‘relaxed atmosphere of the teaching’. Many students wanted more practical work, although some also called for better integration of the theory to support the practical extension of ideas. In terms of our own evaluation of the projects we were involved with, we at first stated that we found the teaching to be interesting and challenging. We had fun. We agreed with the students that the practical, hands-on approach was motivating. We also felt that the students engaged in constructing new knowledge and had achieved better outcomes than previously, although we were unable to provide verifiable evidence to support this statement. Hence our desire to seek answers to this more difficult and important assertion. At the time of teaching, our commitments to other areas of the undergraduate program made it difficult to spend much time discussing what we did with others. If we had made time for discussion, we may have been able to make improvements and rectify misunderstandings about theory more quickly. In many ways we were so involved with the teaching and service components of our work that we barely had time to distance ourselves and reflect on what had really/probably happened.

Several months later, we delved further into unpacking the process of making the curriculum module, through continued conversations and discussions. We began to reflect critically on what had taken place. In our self-evaluation of the module, we recognised that we were making superficial and unsubstantiated claims. For instance, attempts to negotiate the curriculum and share power with the students were approaches we had professed to engage in, but at the time neither of us appreciated how difficult this could be, nor how entrenched our view of ourselves as ‘sages on the stage’.

We suspected that we had a great deal more work to do in fully realising our stated intentions of creating a participative learning environment. Dawn recognised that her testing of students’ prior knowledge had reinforced the notion of science as a body of facts and had worked counter to her desire to encourage and enable students to develop other ways of learning about science. Belinda had not fully appreciated students’ reluctance to engage with valuing appropriate practices for the creative arts and their contribution to the early childhood curriculum. In fact they would prefer to be given ‘a bag of tricks’.

Dawn and Belinda also realised that they had not always agreed on particular aspects of the content or theoretical position of the curriculum we had each individually proposed. We had, quite simply and silently, ‘agreed to disagree’. We had pragmatically got on with teaching our own sections of the course. There was little time to prepare, and our teaching timetables were complex, so the opportunity to discuss our intentions did not occur. Upon reflection we both know this was unsatisfactory, but at the time we had few options. We learned from this, and as we moved through the teaching cycle, it was not surprising to realise that we both had different views of how the students would gain an understanding and an appreciation of early childhood arts and science curricula. This is not to say that we necessarily should have the same theoretical position, but at least we should have discussed what we were aiming to achieve and what informed our position. Working together to process our story, we appreciated each other’s insights and started to reflect more purposefully on what had been happening in our classrooms. Teaching in isolation is very much standard practice and had acted as a barrier to critiquing others’ pedagogy. Allowing someone else access to what had happened, albeit retrospectively and through discussion, has deepened our understanding of our own practice. However, our deepening collaborative relationship became an impediment for others to share their experience. While we had exposed our weaknesses and strengths to each other, it was a risk that others did not feel supported to take. We found it increasingly difficult to share our understanding of what took place in our classrooms with others who had not gone through the process of making their practice explicit and open to critique. As Zeichner and Liston (1996) comment: ‘To be engaged in this sort of examination with others requires that trust becomes a prominent feature of these conversations among and dialogues between practitioners’ (p. 19). Whether this trust could have been built with ongoing support and encouragement remains unknown, since both of us moved to new positions in different institutions. However, we took this new understanding with us and were both more aware of the need to foster a collaborative and open relationship within our new departments.
Concluding thoughts

In this paper we have aimed to demonstrate how purposeful reflection through the storytelling tool has resulted in a deeper knowing of what happened in our classrooms, which we believe has led to improved teaching and learning outcomes for our students, even though we are both now in new contexts.

We have discovered that we had many beliefs about teaching and learning that were unexamined. But, contrary to Schon’s (1983) portrayal of reflection as being a solitary process, we found that interaction with others generated more productive lines of inquiry. We believe that the collaborative process of storytelling has enabled us to critically unravel implicit and tacit beliefs and actions associated with developing curriculum and teaching. The approach we have detailed here has enabled us to better understand and improve our own practice as teachers, not only in the context of educating early childhood teachers but in other areas as well.

We hope that we have provided an insight into our lived experience and how we constructed and reconstructed our ideas. Ultimately, it needs to be acknowledged that our researching and reflecting on practice was ‘messy’. By sharing our story we are offering a personal dimension to the study of teacher education practices that others may find useful. We feel as though we have discovered anew what can be done through purposeful reflection. While we encourage our students to undertake such reflection, modelling the effects of this in our own work has had good effect. Taking the time to look carefully at what we have done has changed how we both go about our current work. We realise that there are many things we can improve in our practice as educators. In making public the method behind our private discussions in this paper, we have created an opportunity to discuss and think purposefully about how we have gone about achieving better learning outcomes for the students. We would respectfully urge others to consider storytelling as both reflection and method for intentional knowledge creation for themselves, for their colleagues and for the benefit of students.

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