In this issue

Teachers’ definitions of school readiness

The impact of globalisation on immigrant families

Dr Seuss: How his work guides character education

Perceptions of service quality: Community-based, independent-private or corporate care?

and more …
AJEC

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**THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT** the world around us influences how we see things—and that, in turn, influences how we behave. Many years ago I argued that ‘what we believe is what we do’ (Sims, 1999). More recently, when interpreting the EYLF, I used the same underlying premise to argue that we ‘...need to help children recognise that we are all different, and that difference is exciting’ (Sims, 2009b). Just as the ELYF asks us to help children develop the skills and understanding necessary for behaving in a manner that is fair and equitable, we also need to act in a similar manner ourselves when performing our roles as early childhood professionals. We need to actively seek out new challenges, and stretch our minds and thinking by reflecting on situations and contexts that are different to those with which we are familiar. Through reflection on different contexts, different practices and different knowledge, we can grow in our own understanding of the world around us and increase our capacity to deliver high-quality practice. We need to be exposed to ideas and practices from all around the world, as this will help us to reflect on how to improve what we do in our own little corner of the world. We need to think about experiences from the perspective of others, not just our own perspective, in order to build more holistic understandings.

The articles in this edition offer us an opportunity to do just that. **Hare and Anderson** write about the transition of Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit and Metis) children in Canada into early childhood services. The transition for these children and their families is influenced significantly by the history of oppression of the Aboriginal people in Canada—a situation which in some ways parallels the experiences of Aboriginal Australians. The authors argue that the transition experience is different for Aboriginal children in Canada, when compared to non-Aboriginal Canadian children. This, of course, has implications for the support that is offered throughout the transition process and the services as well.

This interface between indigenous and hegemonic cultures is also reflected, to some degree, in an article by **Sanagavarapu**. She discusses the experiences of immigrant parents who develop a form of ‘hybrid parenting’ as they attempt—both within themselves as individuals and in their family as a system—to find a way to combine the cultural inheritance of their homeland with the cultural mores of the land in which they now live. In a sense, these families operate on a ‘bridge’ (Sims, O’Connor & Forrest, 2003) between two cultures and each individual traverses that bridge daily as they move in and out of their family home. Children are often consciously placed in an ‘interpreter’ role, as they translate the culture of residence to other family members, who remain closer to the cultures of the origin side of the bridge. Sanagavarapu argues that we must be aware of this hybridisation—especially given that each family will make their own individual adaptations, which means that no two families (even two from the same village) will follow the same pattern of hybridisation. We cannot make our judgements through stereotypes—we need to be sensitive to the needs of each individual child and family.

The fact that cultural differences exist is a reality of our world and these differences are worth celebrating. **Wong** offers us an opportunity to reflect on the different ways that Chinese children think about death when compared to the established literature, which presents a Western perspective. Whilst there are considerable similarities in the thinking of the Chinese children and the Western children in this study, the Chinese children also demonstrated an approach that was not reflected in the Western literature. Influenced by their cultural context, they introduced the idea of character status—i.e. Was the death a deserving death? ‘Baddies’ for example deserve death, but ‘goodies’ do not—so the death of a ‘goodie’ is likely to engender more sadness. Wong wondered to what extent had the children’s exposure to the media (movies etc.) influenced their development of such a concept.

Being part of a culture involves learning the values and beliefs of that culture. Education systems are culturally bound and educational curricula, either deliberately or not, teach children values. Often, education on values is part of the hidden curriculum—teachers, immersed in their own culture, perceive values as truisms and act accordingly. However, in some curricula (such as *Te Whāriki*), explicit values education is being more regularly addressed. **Singer** offers us her ideas on how popular children’s books by Dr Seuss can be used to deliberately target learning outcomes in *Te Whāriki*—particularly those associated with the values of the children’s varied cultural heritages.

The remaining articles in this edition demonstrate, less directly, the impact of our values on our practice. **Noel** examines the perceptions of Prep teachers and school administrators around the time of transition into school, on the premise that a holistic understanding of school readiness is linked to a more effective transition. On the whole, the participants all held a holistic understanding of school readiness and Noel is keen to explore a comparison with comparable American teachers, as well as with the broader community, in future studies.
Early childhood professionals have known for many years that social-emotional development is critical for positive child outcomes. However, the difficulty of measuring it, documenting it and providing developmental milestones often means that early childhood professionals struggle to address it effectively in their programming. My own experience with students is that they experience real difficulties even deciding what to record when observing the answers to social-emotional questions. Barblett and Maloney provide us with an overview of the findings of their major literature review, which was undertaken to examine the assessment of social and emotional competence, and wellbeing in young children. I hope that the high value that we place on social-emotional development can, with their help, be translated into high-quality practice.

Despite our efforts to improve early childhood practice, there are still strong Western gender beliefs that represent non-parental care for young children as problematic (Sims, 2009a). Mothers often feel torn between their competing values—values that privilege both employment and the stay-at-home care of young children. Boyd, Thorpe and Tayler investigate the preferences of pregnant first-time mothers in relation to returning to work and using non-parental care options for their baby. These mothers have yet to experience the childcare system, therefore their ideas have not been influenced by their own history with the system. Most of the mothers (78 per cent) intend to return to work by the end of the first 12 months—though many of them plan to aim for part-time work. For most, employment is not so much a financial necessity as it is a personal benefit: mothers feel satisfaction when contributing through employment, and enjoy the relationships and feeling of self-worth that it brings them.

Finally, Weaven and Grace investigate issues of quality across the different governance structures of child care. This has been a hot topic for a number of years (fuelled not in the least by the closure of ABC childcare centres), but in Australia it has proven very difficult to engage participants in research. One notable exception is the work by Emma Rush (2006), which was undertaken some time ago. Weaven and Grace’s results support those first reported by Rush. Their sample of 21 childcare staff and 20 parents reported, through in-depth interviews, that in their view there were different levels of quality associated with community-based, private independent and corporate centres. All participants reported that they believed that corporate centres offered the lowest quality service. Staff thought that community-based services offered the highest quality but parents did not differentiate between community-based and private independent centres. It is interesting to conjecture how our thinking on who should auspice child care is influenced by our own values related to the links between profit-making and children.

So, here is a new edition of AJEC, with lots of interesting ideas to stimulate our thinking and encourage us to reflect on how we see the world and our role in that world. I wish you happy reading and productive thinking.

References


Margaret Sims
University of New England
Preferences of first-time expectant mothers for care of their child: ‘I wouldn’t leave them somewhere that made me feel insecure’

Wendy Boyd
Southern Cross University

Karen Thorpe
Queensland University of Technology

Collette Taylor
The University of Melbourne

AUSTRALIA HAS WITNESSED A continual increase in maternal employment over the past two decades, which places focus on both supply of childcare1 and a demand for high-quality care. This study examined childcare preferences regarding the return to paid work of 124 Australian women who were expecting their first child. In contrast with most studies that have retrospective designs, the design of this study presents the perspectives of women prior to the birth of their first child—that is, before they have made a final decision about child care. This study found that the majority (78 per cent) of the women intended to re-commence work within the 12 months after the birth of their child. There were two factors that were the most salient features in their decision making—the quality of care and the personal satisfaction of engaging in paid work. The findings suggest that family-friendly employment practices and access to secure, high-quality child care are key to women’s secure participation in the paid workforce.

Introduction

AUSTRALIA, LIKE OTHER DEVELOPED economies, has witnessed a continual increase in maternal employment over the past two decades—from 40 per cent in 1983 to 53 per cent in 2007 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007a). The Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that 44 per cent of mothers engage in paid work within the first three years of their child’s birth (2007a). Thirty per cent of infants aged one year or younger are in care; and of those, 77 per cent are in care that is considered ‘informal’—that is, care provided by a relative, friend or known other (ABS, 2008). The engagement of women in the paid workforce contributes to national economic development and is recognised in government policy incentives such as cash subsidies and tax relief for childcare fees— incentives which are targeted towards mothers, to encourage them to engage in paid work. Yet these incentives are not currently matched by a focus on early childhood education and care provision. Even though a recent review of paid maternity leave2 was undertaken by the Productivity Commission (2008), Australia has no statutory provision for paid parental leave. Early childhood education and care services for the very young are in high demand, but are often unaffordable. In addition, there is a low availability of family-friendly employment (Organisation for Economic Cooperative Development, 2006).

Accessing high-quality formal childcare in Australia can be difficult for women attempting to return to paid work (Bourke, 2006). The care available is often unaffordable, provides unsuitable hours and is in a location unsuitable for families (Bourke, 2006). Frequently, children have multiple care settings and parents report a high level of satisfaction with these multiple care arrangements (Bowes et al., 2003). Also, the quality of care has been reported as being an emotional barrier to women’s engagement in the workforce in Australia. For example, Harris (2008) reports that women feel emotionally torn by the decision to support their family financially, which may come at the cost of placing a child in a non-parental care setting that they deem as unacceptable. Against a background of increasing public and private demand for women’s participation in the workforce, and the related need for non-maternal care, this study asks: What is important for women regarding their decisions to engage in paid work and choose care for their child?

Maternal employment decisions

Maternal employment decisions are influenced by practical and personal considerations. Income needs (National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), 1997) and workplace conditions (Probert, 2002) are pragmatic considerations, while

1 ‘Childcare’ in this article refers to care in a formal childcare setting. ‘Child care’ refers to care for the child.

2 Correct at time of writing and data collection, paid parental leave is now in place.
personal considerations may include career investment, personal enjoyment of employment (Maher & Lindsay, 2005) and maintenance of skills (Elgar & Chester, 2007). Accessing child care that mothers deem affordable and suitable for their children is both a pragmatic and personal consideration.

Engaging in paid work has been shown to have a protective effect on the emotional and financial wellbeing of both parents and their children (Bennett, 2008; Dearing, Berry & Zaslow, 2006). An inability to access paid work may place parents and children in poverty—which may have long-term consequences for all (Brooks-Gunn, Han & Waldfogel, 2002). A commitment to engagement in paid work has been found to be strongly associated with having secure infants (Harrison & Ungerer, 2002). Engagement in paid work supports the emotional wellbeing of most women (Brooks-Gunn, Han & Waldfogel, 2002), and is consistently reported to be associated with a decreased risk of depression (Zimmerman & Katon, 2005). Maternal emotional wellbeing is, in turn, a predictor of child wellbeing and cognitive development (Murray & Cooper, 2003).

While engagement in paid work may benefit parents and their children, mixed results have been reported regarding the effects of child care on children's development. For example, in the United States of America (US), some of the negative effects of child care on infant development were shown to be linked to children exhibiting higher externalising behaviours at 54 months of age (NICHD, 2004). Using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), Harrison (2008) found that high-quality child care was associated with positive socioemotional outcomes in children, based on reports from caregivers. Importantly, NICHD has also found that the quality of parenting is of greater significance to a child's development than time spent in child care—which highlights the central role of parental wellbeing on children's learning and development (NICHD, 2006). More recently, results from a five-year Canadian study have shown that non-maternal care of infants prior to the age of nine months can advantage 'at risk' infants. Children defined as 'at risk' included those that had mothers who did not complete high school (Cote et al., 2007). Furthermore, in a review of 40 years of US research on the effects of childcare on children's development, Shpancer (2006) concluded that there was little evidence that childcare is harmful to children.

However, the view that childcare can be harmful for young children persists in Australia and this view is promoted in popular media—for example, see Clausen (2006); Manne (2005) and Biddulph (2005). A common theme in such media reports is the ‘potential harm’ to young children who experience childcare, which is supported through drawing on research studies such as those pertaining to attachment (for example, reports by NICHD). Yet NICHD also reports positive effects on cognitive and language development (NICHD, 2004). Women in Australia make decisions about returning to paid work in an environment of negativity that is overtly promoted by the media. Such negativity frequently frames childcare as a poorer quality of care than that provided by the parents themselves; those who use childcare as uncaring parents; and childcare for infants as acceptable only if the mother needs to engage in paid work (Ailwood & Boyd, 2007).

The availability and accessibility of care deemed acceptable by the mother is a key variable in deciding to participate in the workforce (Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), 2006). Furthermore, care that is of an acceptable quality to the mother is also a key factor in promoting workforce participation (Coffey, 2004). A mother who is engaging in paid work and feels dissatisfied with her child’s care is likely to suffer a decline in emotional wellbeing in the workplace (Craig, 2007). The Australian Government Budget documents (2008) acknowledge that, in addition to cash support to help raise children, families ‘need the convenience and the reassurance of knowing their children are receiving high-quality care and first class early education’ (p. 22). The quality of the care impacts on maternal employment decisions because it affects the wellbeing of both the mother and her child.

Despite the increasing rates of maternal employment, there is still a strong public perception that it is the role of women to be the primary caregiver, and have prime responsibility for the wellbeing and development of their child (OECD, 2006). Furthermore, having young children is more likely to affect the employment patterns of mothers than fathers (Baxter et al., 2007). Some Australian government policies offer incentives for mothers to engage in paid work (such as cash subsidies and tax relief for childcare service fees), and have been couched in terms of ‘offering parents choice’ (Family & Community Services & Indigenous Affairs (FACSIA), 2006). However, the personal incomes of two-income families are taxed at very high effective marginal tax rates and the second earner (usually the mother) also faces her benefits potentially being withdrawn as her income increases (Hill, 2007). This may act as a barrier to engaging in paid work (Apps, 2007). Such tax policies are grounded in maternalism (the belief that a young child should be cared for solely by the family) and monotropism (the belief that the mother is the only appropriate carer). These beliefs have been deeply embedded within the governmental social and family policies of many countries, including Australia (OECD, 2006; Mahon, 2005), and reflect a traditional ideology of gender where a woman's role as carer is prioritised over paid employment (Hill, 2007). The Henry tax review, commissioned by the Australian Government, seeks to (among a number of objectives) enhance economic, social and environmental wellbeing, especially focusing on appropriate incentives for workforce participation for both women and men (Henry, 2008). This review reflects the changing approach and ideology of the Australian government when it comes to maternal employment.
This paper asks: “How do women who are expecting their first child view their engagement in paid work?” The study is set in the Australian context—where the public perception places the responsibility for child care in the private domain and primarily with women. The intensely personal responsibility for care decisions bestowed on a woman is markedly apparent and is reported in a New Zealand study by Kahu and Morgan (2007, p. 58). In this study, mothers talk about the difficulties they have in ‘weaving together the sometimes incompatible identities’ of being a mother and a successful career woman. In order to be a successful career woman, a mother must access non-maternal care for her child.

Studies have identified that parents prefer low child:caregiver ratios (Goodfellow, 2001), trustworthy caregivers (Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999; Vincent & Ball, 2001) and care located in the home environment (Pence & Goelman, 1987). However, the quality of the relationships between the caregiver and the parent (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997), and the caregiver and the child have been found to be the most salient factors of care for mother and child wellbeing (Barnes et al., 2006). One recent study on mothers’ dissatisfaction with care found that these relational aspects of care are extremely important to a mother’s response to non-parental care for her child (Harris, 2008).

Due to the fact that most previous studies have been derived from parents’ reports of satisfaction with the quality of the care after the childcare decisions have been made, it has not been possible to make valid conclusions about the care preferences of parents. In such studies, parents may have justified their selection of care as satisfactory, which may not give a true indication of the parents’ preferences for, and views of, the care that their child receives. It is likely that parents report satisfaction with their chosen care because the care is now familiar, the care enables the parent to engage in paid work, and there is no overt harm to their child. Determining a parent’s care preference requires an investigation into the parent’s preferences and intentions prior to the care being chosen and experienced.

Little is known about what mothers prefer in regards to their paid work decisions and their interface with care preference. Results drawn from an extensive search of the research literature reveal that only one study (Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 2000) recruited parents prior to the birth of their child and selection of child care. Their study confirmed that the parents’ selection behaviour was associated with changes in their perceptions of work flexibility, the attitude of employers towards maternal employment and work commitment. While this study investigated the changed attitude of mothers towards maternal employment and non-parental care, it did not address issues of care quality. This current study uses a similar prospective design to examine the influence of beliefs and perceptions regarding the type and quality of non-parental care on the process of maternal care decision making.

A real choice of care can only truly exist when the preferred care can be accessed. The exact nature of a mother’s preferred choice of care is unclear from extant research, because the studies have recruited parent participants through care providers. Thus, as a consequence, the choice of care has been reported after mothers have already made their decision, and accepted and adapted to the care provision. This current study used a prospective design that examined preferences regarding intended engagement in paid work and the anticipated characteristics and quality of child care of first-time expectant mothers.

The current study

The data in this study has been sourced from phase one of a prospective longitudinal study tracking 124 expectant first-time mothers from the transition of their third trimester of pregnancy (phase one—May to December, 2007) until the child is 18 months old. First-time expectant mothers provide a unique perspective on both generalised societal views on motherhood, maternal employment and the personal process of decision making. As they approach motherhood, they may have already commenced the decision-making process regarding whether to engage in paid work after the birth of their child; how much work to engage in; and at what point they will re-enter the workforce. They will be considering their personal preferences regarding care for their child and balancing these preferences against practical constraints of availability and accessibility of care that is deemed to be of suitable quality.

Past research has focused on either parental aspirations towards paid work, or non-parental care—not the way that decisions are made in relation to each of these elements. Focusing on the care of the child (not just non-parental care) without examining the reasons for engaging in paid work hinders our understanding of the decisions regarding engagement in paid work and the selected care for the child. This study utilises a similar prospective design to that of Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (2000) in the US, but examines decisions about paid work and care in an Australian context. This study developed detailed assessments of decision making in regards to workforce participation as women approached motherhood, with particular reference to care characteristics and quality, and to the women’s personal reasons for engaging in paid work.

Specifically, the study asked two key questions:

1. Do women want to engage in paid work after the birth of their first child?
2. What are the salient issues regarding choice of care for the child?

Measures

This study draws on data derived from a questionnaire that included both closed and open-ended questions.
The questionnaire was specifically designed for this study, although it did include some standard measures. Questions were asked about:

- demographics: age, household income, marital status, education level and the cultural group with whom the participants identify
- current and expected paid work engagement and entitlement
- preferences and intentions regarding care and paid work, and the salient factors that influence these preferences.

Participants

The 124 participants were recruited using two methods:

- Directly approaching expectant mothers in four hospital ante-natal classes and clinics conducted by the Health Authorities in northern NSW (19 respondents) and Brisbane (80 respondents).
- Requesting volunteers through the media—namely, a Queensland university’s online news website and a national parent magazine (25 respondents, mostly from Brisbane).

In order to gather data from a wide cross-section of the population, participants were recruited from a number of different locations—these represented both urban and rural settings and varying socioeconomic backgrounds. The four hospitals targeted included three hospitals in Brisbane (two public and one private); and one public hospital in northern NSW. Of the three public hospitals, two were situated in lower socioeconomic areas. The call for volunteers through the Queensland university media website complemented the range of participants in the study.

The ages of the expectant first-time mothers ranged from 17 to 39 years old (average age 29 years, SD 4.99) and the age range of their partners was from 20 to 48 years old (average age 31 years, SD 5.46). The marital status of the participants was: 65 per cent married; 31 per cent co-habiting; and 4 per cent single. The average household yearly income was between $60,000 to $80,000, which was typical of the Australian population at the time (ABS, 2007c). Participants were also asked to nominate the cultural group with which they identified. There were 84 Australians, nine New Zealanders, six from the United Kingdom (UK), six Europeans and 12 from other cultural groups. Age, marital status, household income and cultural background were typical of the Australian population (ABS, 2007a). Half of the women held a university degree or above, which is higher than the Australian average of 35 per cent for the age group 25 to 40 years (ABS, 2007b). The Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ABS, 2009) was used to categorise the participants’ occupations. Of the participants, 46 per cent were from professional/managerial groups (Groups 1–3); 31 per cent were working in trades or intermediate clerical/service work (Groups 4–6); and 11 per cent engaged in elementary work such as clerical/sales and factory work (Groups 7–9). Of the remaining 12 per cent, half were studying and half were not working.

Results and analysis

Work engagement and leave entitlements

The majority of participants (73 per cent) were still working in their third trimester of pregnancy and 63 per cent of these were working 35 hours per week or more, mostly on a permanent basis (66 per cent).

Maternity leave status

Of the women who had been engaging in paid work, 66 (59 per cent, N=112) were entitled to 12 months maternity leave and 45 (40 per cent) were entitled to paid maternity leave from one to 26 weeks. Table 1 shows the entitlements to paid maternity leave and the occupational level as identified according to the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ABS, 2009).

Table 1. Paid maternity leave entitlement and related occupation profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of weeks</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Number of participants from each occupation level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>16 from Groups 1–3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>38 from Groups 4–6</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12 from Groups 7–9</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2 from Groups 4–6</td>
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<td>7–11</td>
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<td>3 from Groups 1–3</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2 from Group 4–6</td>
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<td>15–25</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5 from Groups 1–3</td>
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Engaging in paid work

Participants were asked to respond to the statement ‘I feel I must work for the income’ with one of four options: Yes income only; Yes mainly for income; No mainly other reasons; and No only for other reasons.

Results indicated that the majority of the women in this study did not work for income only (see Figure 1). Approximately one quarter (25 per cent) of the women indicated that they worked for income only. The rest of the women either worked mainly for income or for other reasons—indicating that these women engaged in paid work for personal, not just pragmatic, reasons.
To identify the factors that attract women to engage in paid work, the participants were asked: ‘What are the main things that matter to you in your paid work?’ The six key themes that emerged from the responses, and that were identified as the most important to these women, include satisfaction; income; relationships; flexibility of work conditions; value and respect; and learning and challenge (see Figure 2). In the participants’ words:

1. Income: ‘getting income to support myself and family’; ‘the money’; ‘pay rate’.
2. Satisfaction: ‘achieving something, contributing to my family’s future’; ‘that clients are happy with my performance’; ‘variety’; ‘appreciation from employer for optimal work performance’.
4. Flexibility: ‘flexibility in hours/part-time work’; ‘that there is some flexibility (doctor’s appointments) with hours’; ‘family friendly’.
5. Value and respect: ‘that my effort is appreciated’; ‘that everyone else pulls their weight’.

These six categories were further analysed by counting the number of times the particular theme was mentioned, and then placing it in order of when it was mentioned.

**Figure 1.** Responses to the statement: I feel I must work for the income

**Figure 2.** What matters in paid work

Further analysis was conducted to identify the importance of pragmatic and personal views of paid work. ‘Income’ and ‘Flexibility of work conditions’ were combined into the ‘pragmatic’ category, and the four categories of ‘Satisfaction’, ‘Relationships’, ‘Value and respect’ and ‘Learning and challenge’ into the ‘personal’ category. The personal value of engaging in paid work was highly salient and accounted for 70 per cent of responses (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** The importance of pragmatic and personal views in paid work

**Intended timing of return to paid work**

More than half (54 per cent, N=124) of the participants intended to engage in paid work by the time their child was six months old, and 79 per cent by the time their child was 12 months old. Thirteen per cent did not intend to engage in paid work in the first year of their child’s life. Most women intended to work at reduced hours compared to those worked prior to the birth of their child. Sixty-two per cent intended to work, on average, 21 hours per week, in comparison to the 64 per cent who were working 35 hours or more during pregnancy.

**Care of the child**

**Intended type of care**

Participants were asked what their intended care was for their child at six and 12 months old (see Figure 4). For children up to six months of age, the preference for care was people known by the mother—that is, family and friends. By 12 months, the anticipated care patterns shifted, with increasing numbers preferring formal childcare.

**Figure 4.** Intended care at six and 12 months postpartum
Personal preferences and definitions of quality in care

Participants were asked this series of open-ended questions: ‘If you were looking for care for your child, what would you seek? Why? What would you avoid? Why?’

Responses were analysed using an iterative process that revealed five emergent themes:

1. The characteristics of the carer
2. The setting of the care
3. The care environment
4. The ‘child-centredness’ of the care
5. The pragmatics of care

The relational aspects of care (namely themes 1 to 4) were collapsed into a single variable representing the care that has direct impact on the child’s development and learning. This component of care was of most concern to the women. It was of much greater importance than the pragmatics of the care, the location and the affordability (see Figure 5). To demonstrate the salience of each of these components of care, the following section includes direct quotes from the participants.

1. The characteristics of the carer

A. Family carer

Family care was most frequently identified as the preferred care because of the close relationships that often exist within families. As part of these close relationships, the participants felt that they would be able to trust a family carer. One participant stated:

*Because you personally know them and you know they can be trusted.*

Family care was also seen to support one’s child-rearing values. One participant commented:

*[Grandparents] have our standards and views on child rearing and discipline.*

Alternative forms of care, such as childcare, were used to justify the preference for family carers. The child was seen to receive more individualised attention in a family care setting, as the following comments illustrate:

*I prefer my baby to be looked after one on one with a trusted family member.*

*I believe [that] child care at an early age is not right ... I understand [that] babies need interaction with other kids, but babies are so fragile.*

One participant identified paid home-based care as being undesirable for them, stating that it was ‘unstructured, disorganised and unaccountable’. Nannies were described by another participant as ‘expensive, and potentially dangerous in case of an emergency’.

Three participants explicitly expressed preference for not having relatives care for their child because they wanted to be independent of their family and raise their child according to their own values. One commented:

*These carers [family members] will judge me and try to tell me to follow their rules.*

B. Care other than family

Participants identified the following as characteristics of carers that they preferred (when the carer is not family): ‘experienced’, ‘qualified’, ‘friendly’, ‘responsible’, ‘loving’ and ‘not young’. Carers who possessed these characteristics were viewed as being able to support their child’s development, wellbeing and happiness. As one woman said:

*I want what’s best for my child obviously. I wouldn’t leave them somewhere that made me feel insecure or doubt the carer’s competence.*

One participant commented that experienced carers ‘reduce my concerns about leaving my precious bundle with a stranger’. Two respondents indicated that a calm environment was important, stating:

*[Experienced carers] do not get stressed in their job easily.*

*[Young carers] get flustered easily and can’t handle the crying and stress of the babies.*

Other participants identified a safe environment, security and happiness as important factors, commenting:

*So that my child feels safe and happy, and all needs [are] met.*

*So that my child feels secure, and that their optimal development is facilitated.*

*I want my child to have happy experiences.*

Security was seen as being important from a physical and emotional perspective—that is, the provision of a predictable and secure environment. Preference was given to carers who could communicate well and there was avoidance of carers who were disengaged and negative:
I would avoid overly negative people who I don’t consider to be good role models, people who didn’t listen to my way of doing things.

Some participants said that they would avoid carers who were smokers, alcoholics or paedophiles.

2. The setting of the care

For many participants, care in the home was viewed favourably in comparison to centre-based child care because it has low child–caregiver ratios and the carer is familiar. Centre-based care was considered favourable by 16 participants, providing that it had stable, qualified and experienced staff, and a low child–staff ratio. One participant commented:

[I would seek] a childcare centre with long-term staff who care about the children and provide emotional support. [Also, a] safe and stimulating physical environment—I think these are the most important aspects for our child’s wellbeing.

Some participants expressed preference for a childcare centre that had a good reputation, and that was reliable and recognised. Twenty-nine participants said that they would avoid all childcare centres because of the high child–staff ratios, lack of attention, increase in exposure to illness and poor quality of care. Three participants said they would prefer a not-for-profit community-based service, and 10 participants singled out commercial and profit-driven centres as places that they would avoid. These centres were described as being overcrowded, expensive and unsafe environments with young, unqualified and inexperienced staff, poor reputation and a genuine lack of concern for children. As two participants stated:

I have not been impressed with profit-driven cost cutting.

[At these centres], your child is just another number on their books.

3. Child-centredness of the environment

This category focused on the provision of care. Participants identified that the care needed to be child-centred (44 responses), and safe and hygienic (40 responses). Knowing that their child was safe and well cared for would make leaving the child in another person’s care easier—there would be less guilt and less anxiety. As one participant stated:

It would make me feel more secure in leaving my child at the centre—maybe ease my guilt for having to leave them there if I see they are happy.

4. The pragmatics of care

The pragmatics of care were important for 12 participants, who identified the location of the childcare centre, the convenience and the cost of the care as important factors. An examination of the socioeconomic circumstances of the families did not suggest a systematic relationship with material wealth—nine of these women had incomes above $80,000, and five of them less than $60,000.

Discussion

This study examined the preferences of 124 Australian first-time expectant women in regards to returning to paid work and the care of their child. While not a large sample, these women provide a unique perspective. They do not yet have direct personal experience when it comes to caring for their child but rather are dependent on secondary sources of information. Their accounts provide a broad social perspective on motherhood, work and family balance, as well as child care provision. These views affect their decision making regarding returning to work after the birth of their child. The decisions of those who are opting to return to paid work (and therefore use an alternative to full-time maternal care) were analysed based on two key factors—personal and pragmatic factors. The following discussion will focus on the two research questions identified earlier.

Do women want to engage in paid work after the birth of their first child?

The women in this study were committed to their engagement in paid work. A majority of the women (74 per cent) were continuing to work late into their pregnancy. Half of the women (54 per cent) intended to return to paid employment by the time their child was six months old, and three-quarters of the women (78 per cent) at 12 months postpartum. Thirteen per cent expressed a preference for full-time maternal care during the first year postpartum. The rate of return to paid work in this study is much higher than the employment rate of mothers with children under one year of age in Australia, which is 30 per cent (ABS, 2008). This may reflect a higher-than-average level of education among the sample (see ABS, 2007b). Most of the women intended to work part-time and to combine this paid work with non-maternal care. For the participants of this study, the personal value of paid work was of greater salience than the pragmatic rewards of income. Engagement in paid work was seen as a source of personal identity, wellbeing and ongoing learning. The women’s personal views clearly aligned with the literature, which identifies the value of work in personal wellbeing (Dearing et al., 2006). It is not clear from the data whether these women’s decisions would differ if paid parental leave was available to all of them but only 25 per cent agreed that they worked for income alone. Our data suggest that most women want to engage in paid work, though at reduced
hours, to maintain the benefits of paid employment alongside their new role as a parent.

Policies that provide family-friendly employment arrangements, paid parental leave and childcare support directly affect maternal employment decisions. The majority of these women were not entitled to paid maternity leave. An examination of the occupations of the women who were entitled to paid maternity leave revealed that 76 per cent were working at a managerial/professional level. Of the women who were not entitled to any maternity leave, 76 per cent were from trades or clerical/sales backgrounds. The proposed paid parental leave scheme (proposed for implementation in 2011) may provide a fair solution to these current inequities. The availability of family-friendly employment policies is viewed as one way to not only promote gender equity in employment opportunities, but also a way to support the wellbeing of children and families (OECD, 2006).

What are the salient issues regarding choice of care for the child?

The women in this study, though committed to engaging in paid work, were concerned about finding care for their child that would not only serve the pragmatic need of enabling them to work but that would also be of a quality that would serve the emotional need of providing for the wellbeing of their child and their own emotional security as mothers. The pragmatic features of accessing child care were found to be of less importance than having good quality care. The women, although wanting to return to work, were concerned about their own sense of security when leaving their child in care. The women expressed preference for care provision that was child-centred; that was with a carer who was trustworthy, known and reliable; and that was in an environment that was safe, clean and stimulating. Most of the women planning to return to work in the first year postpartum anticipated using informal care—that is, sharing care with their family. This finding suggests an emphasis on ‘known relationships’ and concern for the attachment needs of the child. These data lend support to the case for paid parental leave that is currently under review in Australia.

A minority of the women were aiming to utilise formal childcare during the first year of life. Centre-based childcare was viewed as preferable because it is formally regulated, and has qualified and experienced staff present. A notable feature of this study is that these women did not want ‘young’ and/or inexperienced caregivers. Those expressing this preference showed concern for the emotional security of both themselves and their child. This preference has important implications for government policy on the training of early childhood teachers and childcare workers, who may be perceived by parents as young and inexperienced upon completion of their training. Among all of the women, the concern for personalised service and good relationships between the child and the carer was paramount. For 10 women in this study, these aims were identified as opposed to the needs of corporate childcare providers, whose focus is profit. This perception—that parents would avoid profit-driven child care if given the choice—is an important factor for the government policies on childcare provision.

As women seek non-maternal care for their children, they need to feel assured that the care they select provides for the needs of their child. Our data show that most women feel that they benefit emotionally from engagement in paid work and intend to return to work following the birth of their children. How successfully and securely they return to paid employment is intimately related to the nature of the care they want for their newborn children. At a time following the collapse of the ABC Learning Centres, Australia’s child care provision is facing a need for re-construction. The investigation of paid parental leave as a universal form of family provision is also timely. Therefore, the views of these women provide a reminder of the challenges that today’s women encounter in balancing their work and family roles. This study places focus firmly on the security provided by strong relationships between carers and children, and also between the carers and the mothers who leave their children in care.

References


Introduction

THERE IS OVERWHELMING EVIDENCE that growth and development in the social and emotional domain during the early years affects the health, wellbeing and competence of children throughout life (Denham, 2006; Mental Health Taskforce, 2004). Experiences that promote curiosity, self-confidence, engagement and satisfying reciprocal relationships have been strongly linked to high levels of self-esteem and socialisation. Therefore, the experiences children are exposed to have the potential to influence their future life trajectory that over time may become more difficult to modify (Farrar, Goldfield & Moore, 2007). More specifically, research conducted by Denham (2006) outlines the importance of social and emotional competence to school readiness, future academic performance, and success in participation and interactions with peers and adults. Support for children’s social and emotional growth in early childhood programs is dependent on how well the teachers know the child and how skilled they are at gaining meaningful information about children’s social and emotional knowledge, skills and dispositions, and how this information is used to create effective programs.

Defining terms

There is considerable debate in the literature about what constitutes ‘social and emotional competence and wellbeing’, how it is defined and how it should be assessed. Terms such as social competence, emotional regulation, emotional literacy, emotional intelligence and mental health abound in the literature and add to the difficulty of clearly defining this construct. Work in psychology, health (both mental health and health promotions) and education often use different terms to describe similar aspects of social and emotional development. While there is variation in the types of terms used, there is general consensus regarding the major aspects of early childhood social and emotional development and the key achievements in this domain. These are:

- **Emotional competence**: defined as ‘the ability to effectively regulate one’s emotions to accomplish one’s goal’ (Squires, Bricker & Twombly, 2003, p.6).
- **Social competence**: described as ‘the ability to integrate thinking, feeling and behaving to achieve interpersonal goals and social outcomes’ (MacKay & Keyes, 2002 cited in Kostelnik et al., 2006, p.2).
Wellbeing: referred to as ‘children’s physical, social and emotional welfare and development’ (Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS), 2005, p.3).

Why is social and emotional competence and wellbeing important?

The empirical research is overwhelming in providing evidence that strong growth in social and emotional competence and wellbeing underlies all later growth and development. A number of benefits identified in the literature highlight the importance of positive growth in this area. These include:

- Positive relationships and inclusion: Positive representations of self, emotional knowledge and regulatory abilities are some of the social and emotional competencies children learn through positive early relationships. Research on early schooling suggests that children’s relationships with teachers and peers are pivotal to school success (Raver & Knitze, 2002; Raver & Zigler, 2004).
- Foundation for positive mental health: Effective social and emotional competence and positive wellbeing are an important foundation for mental health throughout childhood and into later life (Hertzman, 2004; Moore, 2006; Sosna & Mastergeorge, 2005). Effective social skills are attributed to overall happiness, quality of life, good treatment and respect from parents, and high self-esteem (Danielson & Phelps, 2003).
- Early school success: From neurons to neighbourhoods (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) is one work that highlights the link between emotional development and academic learning. There is overwhelming longitudinal evidence over 20 years that children’s early school success is linked to a firm foundation of children’s social and emotional skills (Stipek, 2006; Raver, 2002).
- Integration of developmental domain: Social and emotional competence and wellbeing is important both in its own right and because it affects other domains of development, especially language and communication skills, and early literacy and numeracy (Cohen et al., 2005). Denham (2006) suggests that social and emotional competence can be used to benchmark children’s progress and program effectiveness.

Why assess social and emotional growth and development?

A key theme emerging from the literature is that assessment is a critical component of the learning and teaching cycle. ‘Assessment’ in this paper refers to all forms of measurement and appraisal that are recorded and integrated in an organised manner for the purpose of gathering authentic, regular, detailed and objective information about a child’s accomplishments (MacAfee & Leong, 2002). Effective early childhood programs cannot be created unless teachers know what children can do independently and with the assistance of an adult. Teaching and learning are reciprocal processes that affect each other, and assessment is a way of finding out how well the teacher is teaching and the learner is learning (Kellough & Kellough, cited in Early Learning Standards Taskforce and Kindergarten Assessment Work Group, 2005). Fundamentally, it is important to assess social and emotional competence and wellbeing in children in order to give them the best chance of participating in early childhood programs (Sosna & Mastergeorge, 2005).

Issues and complexities of assessing social and emotional competence and wellbeing

Assessment in the early childhood phase has been described as problematic; however, assessment of social and emotional competence and wellbeing raises further issues worthy of discussion. These include complexities of the domain; focus on academic skills and school readiness; children from diverse cultures and backgrounds; the importance of the teacher; the influence of context; lack of consistency in terminology, including the voice of the child; and ethics associated with assessment.

Complexities of the domain

Social and emotional competence is a multifaceted domain incorporating elements such as feelings, temperament, values, personality, dispositions and behaviour. There is disagreement in the field on what aspects of these elements should be assessed and what the criteria for the assessment of social and emotional competence and wellbeing should be. Young children experience dramatic growth spurts and competencies are constantly evolving, adding to the complexity of assessment. If development and growth is not uniform, and knowledge and skills in this area are socially and contextually framed, decisions about when and how to assess and what to assess become problematic. In addition, Squires, Bricker and Twombly (2003) identify the following key variables—setting and timing of assessment, child health, family culture and child development—as affecting a child’s performance and hence the assessment of social and emotional competence and wellbeing.

Focus on academic skills and school readiness

Arthur et al., (2008, p. 6) reported that, at a conference in Australia on the transition to school, ‘school readiness’
was described as ‘being able to hold a pencil correctly and knowing the letters of the alphabet’. Many early childhood practitioners claim there is a danger that the non-compulsory years of school are becoming more formal, with a focus on academic learning of content areas (Miller & Almon, 2009). It is imperative that social competence and interpersonal skills are seen as equally important when children begin school (Raver, 2002) and become a strong consideration for school readiness, and that early childhood programs provide a balanced curriculum across the development of children’s knowledge, skills and dispositions.

An issue surrounding the focus on academic and school readiness skills in the literature is the use of standardised tests in early childhood. While there may be sound reasons for the use of particular standardised tests, Stipek (2006) emphasises the need for careful development, monitoring and selection of standardised tests used for accountability purposes.

Standardised testing of children has received great criticism in the educational literature (Stipek, 2006). Such tests include developmental inventories, academic readiness tests, diagnostic tools for special needs, group aptitude and achievement tests, and tests in almost any domain or learning area (McAfee & Leong, 2002).

Criticisms is aimed at the use of standardised tests with young children for a number of reasons:

- **Unsuitability for this phase of development:** Standardised tests usually take the children from their familiar environment, or at the very least ask them to do prescribed tasks that are not part of their daily activities. The uneven development across domains in some instances makes it difficult to provide meaningful data, as children may make great social gains in one month but not meet any new academic goals.

- **Technical and educational inadequacy:** Many tests have been developed on an outmoded theory of how children learn and develop (Shepard, 2000). Many tests do not adequately represent the norms of society and therefore cannot be trusted to be valid and reliable in their scoring.

- **Often skills are tested in isolation:** Standardised tests can be a useful measuring tool of cognitive achievement and a measure of mental health, but are not appropriate for all situations and should not comprise the primary source of information about a young child.

- **Unsuitability for some groups of children:** Standardised tests are usually constructed based on the norms of the dominant culture’s middle-class children and as such can be biased against linguistically and culturally different children.

- **Overuse of tests and misuse of data:** This is reported as particularly problematic in the literature in the United States of America. Evidence indicates that if isolated skills are assessed then programs are likely to focus on isolated skills (Stipek, 2006). McAfee and Leong (2002) report that educational institutions spend a lot of time and financial resources on tests and testing. Children are spending much of school time preparing for tests, and the misuse of test data may cost children valuable time if used for purposes of retention.

- **Influence on classroom practice:** All too often standardised tests are being used to show accountability and report how well schools and districts are doing. Such comparisons lead to distortions and misunderstandings of the tests’ properties. They can also sway teachers to teach to the test and not necessarily what is of the greatest worth to the class or individual in a particular context.

However, this is not to say that standardised tests should not be used with young children, but rather that teachers should be cautious. Well-researched and appropriate screening and identification tools should be based on knowledge about how young children learn, and used to provide valuable information to guide important decisions. In some situations tests may be the best way to find out about particular types of learning.

**Children from diverse cultures or with English as an additional language/English as an additional dialect backgrounds**

The literature highlights two important issues when considering the assessment of social and emotional competence and wellbeing of children from diverse cultural backgrounds. The first issue reinforces the concept that culture provides a context in which children develop a sense of identity and a frame of reference that assists them in making sense of their world (Denham & Weissburg, 2004). Hudley (2001, cited in Denham & Weissburg, 2004) reminds us that we can seriously misunderstand the social and emotional needs of children if we do not understand the child’s culture and our own cultural perspective. Therefore, when assessing behaviours associated with social and emotional competence, teachers may make assumptions based on their own culture that are incorrect.

The second issue is that most standardised instruments have been constructed around the norms of white middle-class populations. Such tools tend to label non-mainstream children as abnormal or deviant rather than different (Fantuzzo et al., 1995). An issue of concern is the void of reliable and valid tools to assess the social and emotional competence and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
The importance of the teacher in assessment

There is much written about who should conduct the assessments of young children. The early childhood literature argues that whoever makes the assessment should have a relationship with the child and see the child daily (Edmunds & Stewart-Brown, 2003; McAfee & Leong, 2002). Others suggest it would depend on the type of assessment being completed. If a professional diagnostic assessment were to be made, then speech therapists, occupational therapists, school psychologists or physiotherapists may become involved. Teachers need to make judgements about when to ask for professional assistance, and this is usually done when a holistic study of the child has been conducted by a variety of means, including observations across different situations and from multiple viewpoints. However, there are issues which teachers need to be aware of when making judgements about children’s social and emotional competence and wellbeing. They are:

- Teacher bias and assessment subjectivity: Early childhood practitioners often do not understand that children bring their own cultural lens to experiences, which plays a major role in their interactions with others. This understanding is critical when practitioners apply their own cultural lens to assess, assign meaning to, or interpret the social and emotional competence and wellbeing of children (Denham & Weissberg, 2004). There is abundant evidence of teachers’ cultural bias when making assessments.

- Teacher workload and philosophy: A practical barrier to assessment in this area can be teacher workload. Teachers from a study in the United Kingdom (Edmunds & Stewart-Brown, 2003) reported that time and school supports were issues they needed to contend with. They said they found both informal and formal assessments to be time-consuming and that time had become a barrier for assessment.

- Teacher wellbeing and school/classroom environment: Weare and Gray (2003) report that the teacher’s own behaviour and attitudes are factors influencing children’s social and emotional competence and wellbeing was the teacher’s own behaviour and attitudes. Teachers cannot transmit emotional and social competence and wellbeing to children if their own emotional and social needs are not being met.

- Teacher knowledge and competence: Central to administering any assessment tool (whether summative or formative) is the teacher’s understanding of assessment procedures and processes and knowledge of the area of social and emotional competence and wellbeing. As well, they need to know how to apply the information they have gained to relevant and useful classroom practice.

Influence of context

As reported in the literature, young children’s learning, actions and behaviours are constantly evolving through social construction within the context of their families and communities. By the time children enter school, their social and emotional wellbeing has been influenced by a number of factors: the immediate setting of family, peers and school impact most directly, while media, government agencies and social services exert a more indirect influence. As development and growth is not uniform, and knowledge and skills are socially framed, decisions about what social competence looks like are problematic.

Lack of consistent terminology

A problem associated with this area is the lack of common terms that describe growth and development. Further, assessment of social and emotional development and wellbeing is often hampered by a lack of appropriate diagnostic terms. A limited range of assessment tools in some cases, and an unwillingness to acknowledge that a range of social and emotional concerns can affect young children, also hamper efforts for policy-makers to consider assessment in this area (Mental Health Taskforce, 2004).

Voice of the child

Many researchers and teachers believe that including the voice of the child in assessment is vital yet largely overlooked as a point of reference, particularly in more formal assessment procedures. As outlined by one UK school principal, children’s feelings and anxieties are demonstrated through words as well as actions, and therefore it is important to listen and hear the child’s voice (cited in Edmunds & Stewart-Brown, 2003, p. 32). Quite young children are capable of making judgements about their own efforts and can play a helpful part in their own assessment. There are practical implications for including the child’s voice but research has shown the use of narratives that give meaning to events and objects, and are constructions of children’s learning and processes, is a valid form of assessment (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998).

Ethics

The rights of children and their families, as described in The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1998), has had an impact on the area of assessment, especially in the early childhood phase. The ethical responsibility in assessment rests on teachers’
understanding of the rights of children and families and their realisation of the limits of their personal knowledge and the choice of assessment tools. US and UK authors describe high stakes accountability that may be responsible for pressuring teachers into practices they believe are not in the best interests of the child (Dowling, 2007; Mindes, 2003). The failure of teachers to consider the ethical issues in assessment and assessment results can cause serious damage, such as lifelong stigmatisation and the restriction of educational prospects. Mindes (2003, p.15) describes the ‘dreadful history in the Unites States in making improper decisions about the mismatch of the assessment tool to the purpose, the interpretation of results beyond the limits of the tool employed and the failure to consider the contextual factors’. Mindes (2003) suggests that making decisions about children’s school entrance, retention or promotion dependent on test results could be detrimental and have lifelong consequences.

Conclusion

Developing strong social and emotional competence is essential for children’s everyday wellbeing, as well as for engagement and learning in school and beyond. Healthy growth in this area is vital for positive mental health and affects growth in all other domains. Assessment in this area should reflect the drive for the highest possible goals for young children’s learning and should be used to support quality teaching and learning programs. The early childhood years are important in their own right, and the cautions of formal assessments need to be heeded so that children’s capabilities are viewed as emerging, not fixed. The literature is clear about the narrowness and inappropriateness of using standardised testing alone, which has the capacity to centre on isolated skills and results in narrow and potentially misleading diagnosis. As reported by Arthur et al. (2008, p4.), it is ‘critical to balance the focus on the future contribution of young children to society with recognition of what happens in their lives in the present’.

Social and emotional competence and wellbeing should be situated within a comprehensive policy on assessment which has a shared knowledge, a shared language, and a comprehensive and coordinated approach to its implementation. The identification of a collection of formal and informal assessment resources that address a range of purposes, contexts, methods and timing, and complement the teacher’s philosophy and school goals, would ensure that tools and processes relate directly to children’s needs.

A number of factors in a child’s life that influence social and emotional competence and wellbeing are beyond the control of the teacher. So processes and procedures need to be put in place to assist teachers in supporting healthy growth in this domain. Assessing social and emotional skills with a range of tools, including observations, can help teachers to identify those that need further diagnosis and assistance.

References


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Transitions to early childhood education and care for indigenous children and families in Canada: Historical and social realities

Jan Hare
Jim Anderson
University of British Columbia

The transition into formal early learning settings, such as preschool and child care, represents a significant milestone for children and families. This paper explores the perspectives of 25 indigenous parents and family members and two caregivers reflecting on the transition of the indigenous children from their home to an early childhood development program in a large urban centre in western Canada. Our findings suggest that the transition experiences begin well before indigenous children and families join a program. There are factors that facilitate their participation, such as costs, transportation and location. How these parents negotiate their transition is impacted by their historical experiences with schooling and the place of culture and language in supporting their children and families. Early learning programs need to understand the social, cultural and historical realities that shape the transition experience for indigenous children and families.

Introduction

THE TRANSITION INTO FORMAL early learning settings, such as preschool and child care, represents a significant milestone for children and families. The literature on transitions to educational settings seems to focus largely on young children’s adjustment to formal schooling and pays little attention to early childhood education as a site of investigation. Current research on the transition from home to an early childhood education setting tends to focus on separation and adaptation, with parents serving as the primary informants on this experience. Further, this literature tends to examine the transition experience at the point when children begin a program—rather than as an ongoing process for children and families.

This paper explores the experiences of a group of indigenous parents and family members and two early childhood educators reflecting on the transition of the indigenous children from their home to an early childhood development program in a large urban centre in western Canada. This study moves the discourse on transitions beyond children and families coping with separation and adjusting to non-familial environments, to consider how the unique social, historical, and cultural and linguistic contexts of Aboriginal families in Canada impact on their transition into early learning environments. We believe that a better understanding of the experiences that Aboriginal families go through as their young children make the transition from home to formal early childhood education and care can have important consequences when it comes to the educational success of Aboriginal children in Canada. This study pays attention to systematic and cultural approaches for supporting Aboriginal parents’ early and continued engagement with early learning settings, and makes clear that transitions to early learning begin well before Aboriginal children join these programs.

Reconceptualist scholars in the field of early childhood education have called for a need to understand diverse experiences—such as those of indigenous children—where issues of power, language and culture can serve to inform research, policies and practices in this field (Canella & Viruru, 2004; Jipson & Hauser, 1998). Although early childhood education is typically defined as encompassing birth through eight years of age, for the purposes of this study early childhood education and care has been defined as child care, pre- or nursery

1 The indigenous people of Canada are referred to as Aboriginal people. The term Aboriginal is inclusive of First Nations, Inuit and Metis people of Canada. The Aboriginal people of Canada refer to themselves by their tribal affiliations.
school, and early childhood development settings or institutionalised care that is not part of the formal education or school system.

Aboriginal children in early childhood education and care in Canada

Indigenous scholar Margot Greenwood (2006) tells us that formalised early childhood education programs and services are relatively new to Aboriginal communities in Canada. She states:

Specific Aboriginal early childhood programs and services were virtually nonexistent in the 1960s and 1970s. Those services that did exist were sporadic and inadequately funded, and as a result were often short-lived. (p. 13)

In their national study of Aboriginal peoples' understandings of quality care for their children, Greenwood and Shawana (1999) found that participants described structured care environments as being foreign or new to them. Traditional care systems recognised the role of the extended family, and emphasised traditional child-rearing practices. These approaches to indigenous child rearing have eroded in Aboriginal communities, and increasingly more families place their children in formal early childhood settings. Some of the participants that took part in Greenwood and Shawana’s study expressed their concerns and reservations about this shift in child-rearing practices. The concerns of these participants are well founded in the roots of colonial practices, which introduced government-legislated child removal practices, such as residential schooling and the ‘sixties swoop’. Residential schooling removed children as young as four years of age from their families and communities, so they could attend institutionalised schools run by various church denominations across Canada, largely during the period of 1850-1950. The systematic erosion of family and community structures, and the Aboriginal culture and language, was the aim of the harsh policies and practices that were carried out at these schools (Hare & Barman, 2000). The effect on families and communities was devastating, and resulted in the serious social conditions endemic in Aboriginal communities in Canada, and a fear and mistrust of formal schooling and care settings.

Following the gradual closures of the residential schools was the phenomenon known as the ‘sixties sweep’, which represents a time during the 1960s and 1970s when unprecedented numbers of Aboriginal children were removed from their families and placed in white foster homes. While there has been a steady decrease over time, Aboriginal children still remain over-represented in the child welfare system. Statistics show that Aboriginal children comprise up to 30 to 40 per cent of children in care in Canada (Bennett & Blackstock, 2003). These children are being raised by grandparents or relatives, although generally non-Aboriginal families. These colonial practices are consistent with similar indigenous experiences seen in the United States, Australia and New Zealand (Armitage, 1995; Prochnor, 2009). Therefore, early childhood education for indigenous peoples cannot be viewed in isolation from the colonial history (Walker & Rodriguez de France, 2007).

Traditional indigenous approaches to learning saw young Aboriginal children living and learning alongside Elders, grandparents, aunts, uncles and parents. Experiential learning, oral tradition and land-based experiences ensured the continuity and survival of Aboriginal groups, their knowledge and culture. Children’s learning was fluid and learning opportunities were part of a seamless process from birth through to adulthood. A structured approach to learning and care (one that separates children from their family and community, and ignores the role of culture and language) invokes a particular tension for Aboriginal families and communities, as it reminds them of a past that devastated their families and communities. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996) indicates that Aboriginal parents are resistant to sending their children to school at an earlier age, particularly since schooling has done little to nurture the identities of Aboriginal children.

Tracing the development of Aboriginal childcare programs and services in Canada, Greenwood (2001, 2006) makes clear that policies and practices related to the care of Aboriginal children need to be developed based on Aboriginal ways of knowing and being. Indigenous knowledge must be at the core of indigenous early childhood education and care for Aboriginal children, families and communities. Reports on Aboriginal early childhood education and care stress the idea of fostering a strong sense of identity, as well as a knowledge of languages, cultures and values, above all else when considering care for Aboriginal children (Assembly of First Nations, 1995; Greenwood & Shawana, 1999; Native Council of Canada, 1990; RCAP 1996). Yet, there still remain persistent challenges in ensuring that Aboriginal children are socialised into their heritage and ancestry (Greenwood, de Leeuw & Frazer, 2007).

Ensuring that indigenous knowledge permeates all aspects of an Aboriginal early childhood education and care setting is a particular challenge in urban and rural centres. This is largely because of the fact that cultural and linguistic resources (such as language speakers, elders and other people with cultural knowledge), land-based experiences, and appropriate books and materials
may be difficult to access when compared to living on a reserve. Reserves (the land-based community assigned to Registered Status Indians by the federal government) are more homogenous in their language and cultural traditions, and local knowledge, customs and protocols may remain intact. There is an increasing presence of Aboriginal people living in urban areas, with nearly 50 per cent of the population who identify as Aboriginal residing in urban centres (Statistics Canada, 2003). A similar population trend is being observed in the United States and Australia (Jackson, 2002). Social supports and services, including those aimed at family intervention and early childhood education and care, are critical for Aboriginal children and families living in urban centres, to help address the cultural and family discontinuity, poverty and marginalisation brought on by the legacy of colonialism and assimilation.

Understanding transitions in the literature

Moving from home to an early childhood education and care environment represents a significant milestone for families and children, and requires many adjustments on their part. A report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2006), Starting Strong II, reviews early childhood education and care in 20 countries, including Canada, and recognises that:

Transitions for children are critical occasions: they can be a stimulus to growth and development, but if too abrupt and handled without care, they carry—particularly for young children—this risk of regression and failure. (OECD, 2006, p. 64)

While the report focuses largely on transitions from early childhood to formal schooling, difficulty going from home to an early childhood education and care setting is an issue in countries where there is discontinuity between childcare and education in the pre-school years and formal schooling. In Canada, a review of early childcare policies paid specific attention to Aboriginal children, and it recommended that strong focus be placed on transitions and actual outcomes when monitoring Aboriginal education beginning in early childhood (OECD, 2004).

Research tells us that transitions to early childhood education and care are experienced differently to the transitions to formal schooling settings (Kagan & Neuman, 1999; Neuman, 2000, 2002; OECD, 2006). This is due to the difference in structure, quality, policies, practices and coherence within these two divisions, despite arguments that these two settings should work together and provide a more seamless connection. Dalli (2002) suggests that research examining children's adjustment from home to early childhood education and care settings has focused too narrowly on children's experiences, with the parents as informants. She also suggests that this research has traditionally focused on the issue of separation. For example, Cryer et al. (2005) noted stress and problem behaviours in 38 infants and toddlers from 19 childcare centres when they moved from a familiar classroom to a new one with a new teacher. These children experienced increased levels of distress when being moved to the new classroom but adapted to their new environment within a month's time. These findings speak to the value of continuity in caregivers in children's transitioning experiences. Assessing the adaptation process to preschool settings for 76 children aged three to four years, Kienig (1998) found that most of the children had problems of various kinds and degrees regarding adjustment to their new preschool. Behavioural problems were the most noted manifestations of disharmony as they adapted to their new context. In a later study, Kienig (2002) found that children who experienced adjustment problems at the start of their preschool year also had a tendency to exhibit behavioural problems at the outset of elementary school. Kienig (1998, 2002) concludes that preschools can help ease the adaptation through gradual entrance practices and familiarisation with the new environment, for example having fewer numbers of children in the group until the transition is complete, and by maintaining close and direct contact with parents.

Taking into account caregivers' perspectives on children's adjustment to early childcare settings reveals how educators themselves respond to young children's adjustment to preschool or childcare environments. Thyssen (2000) observed ten children, aged 11 to 17 months, at the start of their day care experience and observed that the separation of children from their parents is not without significance, and that taking leave from children is difficult for both parents and children. Teachers in that nursery school indicated that they should facilitate the children's need for interaction with peers, activities and objects, as well as with caregivers. Recognising that the teacher plays a major role in a child’s adjustment to a care setting, Kontopoulou (2003) examined the views of 100 kindergarten teachers working in nursery schools. Her interviews revealed that these early childhood educators underestimate the importance and frequency of adjustment difficulties because they find it challenging to recognise them. Those interviewed tended to blame parents and more specifically mothers, for problems in children's adjustment. This study suggests that early childhood educators need to be sensitive to the different factors that play a role in transitions, including parent cooperation and communication, peer-assisted support, and professional consultation. Dalli's (2002) case study of the transition experiences from home to childcare centre involved interviews with six teachers at different day care settings. Through studying interviews, observations and journals kept by the teachers, Dalli
found that teachers’ practices can make a difference in children’s adjustment and they need to be aware of what strategies and practices are effective in assisting families and children.

Dalli’s (2002) work helped expand our understanding of the transition experience from home to childcare settings by telling the stories of the children themselves. Similar to other work that draws on interpretive observations of young children in care settings (Dalli, 2000; Thyssen, 2000), Dalli’s analysis of events suggests that children are actively helped to ‘fit in’ to the early childhood program. However, she concludes that:

... it seems important that, at the level of teacher education and/or professional development, teacher guidance on how to handle this first transition from home to early childhood education setting does justice to the complexity of all the participants’ experience. (p. 49)

Much of this research on transitions from home to early childhood settings represents international studies, and focuses on children and families that are fairly homogenous in terms of race and class. These families generally represent low- to middle-class families entering childcare programs that are diverse in terms of the nature of the program, the structure, the policies and practices, and their relationship to formal education. The transition experience as described in the literature is seen as an event, beginning when a child enters a program—rather than as a process that occurs over time, starting when families make decisions on how, why and where to participate in early childhood education and care environments. The experiences of Aboriginal children and families entering early childhood education and care programs in Canada have not been studied, or at least have not been reported in the literature. Given that structured early childhood education and care programs are a relatively new phenomenon in many Aboriginal communities and that indigenous approaches to care are rooted in cultural understandings and historical experiences, it is especially important to examine the transition experiences of these families. This will aid us in understanding how and why they come to these programs, their experiences as they adjust to their new care arrangements and their participation in the process. Perspectives of Aboriginal parents and families on the care of their children as they move from home to institutional forms of care are critical for redressing the legacy of the past, and for helping Aboriginal families to engage in the care and learning environments of their children.

Methodology

The participants in this study were parents and caregivers from an Aboriginal early childhood development program in an urban city in western Canada. The program, known as Aboriginal Head Start, is an early childhood education program that serves as an early intervention program designed to enhance child development and school readiness for Aboriginal children living in urban and northern communities. As an urban program, it serves families of Metis, First Nation and Inuit ancestry. The Aboriginal Head Start program has been expanded to First Nations reserve communities and in these settings tends to represent a more homogenous group, with the children largely being of First Nations ancestry. The program supports families with children up to six years of age, with a particular focus on preschoolers aged three to five years. Taking a holistic approach to learning, the program nurtures the physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual development of the children. Furthermore, it recognises that the child is part of a family, community, and a larger indigenous society. While the Aboriginal Head Start program was based on the Head Start model used in the United States (Greenwood, 2001), the program was developed through national consultation with Aboriginal groups from across Canada. Six key components form the operating principles of the program:

- language and culture
- nutrition
- health promotion
- education and school readiness
- social support
- parent and family involvement.

For the current study, we invited the Aboriginal Head Start program to participate in the research. Following the program’s permission to conduct the study, we invited parents and families to take part in discussion groups. We held three focus group discussions with Aboriginal parents and extended families at the early childhood centre. The centre is located in the inner-city core, adjacent to neighbourhoods where a number of Aboriginal families live. Twenty-five family members took part in the study. Extended family members included grandparents, aunts or uncles, and foster parents. Not all parents and family members identified as Aboriginal, but all of the children taking part in the program were of Aboriginal ancestry. Two early childhood educators were also interviewed for this study—one identified as Aboriginal and the other was non-Aboriginal. The program strives to hire staff members of Aboriginal ancestry, but given the challenges associated with building capacity in Aboriginal early childhood education and care (Greenwood, 2006), finding staff to fulfill the range of positions in early childhood education and care programs in Aboriginal communities and organisations can be difficult.

The focus group discussions and interviews were guided by questions centred around the following themes:
Focus group sessions and interviews lasted up to one and a half hours, and were audio recorded. Discussions and interviews were transcribed verbatim and returned to the participants as written transcripts for verification. Any errors or omissions in the data were corrected based on feedback from the participants. The researchers conducting this study identify as having Aboriginal ancestry, so are familiar with the history, values and social conditions in the lives of the children and families taking part. After correction, a research assistant read through the data set, and made notes on themes and issues. The two researchers then independently read the data set, again making note of any themes and issues that emerged from the data. The researchers’ notes were then compared to those of the research assistant and any minor differences were resolved through discussion.

Findings

Transition from home to early childhood education and care settings requires accommodations on the part of families, children and caregivers. Our analysis considers the perspectives of 25 Aboriginal parents and family members and two caregivers—all part of an urban Aboriginal early childhood development program. It is important to point out that the family members in this study expressed anxieties about the children’s separation from family due to participation in the program, which is consistent with what is revealed in the literature on families new to childcare settings. As one parent said: ‘I knew she could probably handle it on her own, but I wanted to stay with her … and they let me.’ Another responded, ‘I was worried about the way they would treat her, because she is a big part of my life and she deserves the best.’ Recognising what appears to be a universal concern that families have about their children’s separation and adjustment as they enter school or child care, the findings shared in this paper focus on three themes that reflect the unique social, historical, cultural and linguistic realities of Aboriginal families. Also, this paper considers the transition process to begin when families consider early childhood care settings, as well as including their experiences when they begin and take part in this program. The three themes include:

- pre-program experiences
- program expectations
- entrance experiences
- value of early childhood education and care
- challenges to Aboriginal family participation
- resources and support to assist Aboriginal children and their families.

How these families came to participate in this Aboriginal early childhood education program, and why, forms a significant part of their transition experience. The cost of participating in a program, the location and available transportation can play a role in giving way to either a smooth or difficult transition. Aboriginal Head Start is provided free of charge to children and their families. This feature is important, for as one of the participants commented:

At the parent support program, [someone] told me about everything that was free for Aboriginal children. And I found that to be really good, because just having arrived here [in the city], I didn’t have a lot of money to pay for day care or preschool.

When describing her experience finding a program, another parent explained:

I just assumed [that] S. would go to [another program], and it’s just like an easy thing for me. [However], I found [out that] it costs money, and no one could open the doors for me, and as a new parent, you’re tired because you have kids. I was going to give up.

The program is known by other family support services in the neighbourhood and parents are often referred to the program. As one participant stated, ‘I was new to the area and the [Aboriginal organisation] recommended it. We were told it was a great place.’

Mention was also made of the fact that the centre is located in an area where a large number of Aboriginal families live. This was seen as a way of making the program more accessible. As one parent described, she was taking the bus home when she saw the program’s sign as the bus drove by—so she called to learn more. She stated, ‘I live just a few blocks away. It is a good location. A lot of people see it on the bus.’ Another parent confirmed this:

We live in native housing [close by], and I found out from the bus … I said that it [looked] like an Indian preschool, and I might want to Google it. So then I Googled it, and that’s how I figured out it was an Aboriginal Head Start program. I was really excited.

However, the program is also adjacent to an inner-city area that has many ongoing social problems—such as substance abuse and drug trafficking; a concentration of people with mental health issues; and homelessness and poverty. Several participants
expressed concerns about their children's safety, for example one participant commented, ‘I was concerned about the location.’ Another indicated, ‘I wasn’t keen on the area. But I came and checked it out. The doors were secure, so it made me secure.’ Still, some people felt that the location was problematic, in that some families would not participate because of where the program was located. One family member said:

I think a lot of my friends who have kids who could have gone to Head Start or who are eligible for Head Start might not come here because of the location. And they might not want to check it out, they might not make that first step—they might not make that first step in order to know that it is safe inside here and it’s different from what it looks like.

Furthermore, a bus transportation service is provided for the children—again, this was seen as very important, because of the fact that many of the parents had concerns about their children's safety due to the location. However, the bus service is provided within a defined geographical area surrounding the centre, and one of the participants who lived just outside the eligible area commented:

I don’t have bussing because I’m out of the area, and the program that’s closer to me was full, so I couldn’t use that program and I had to access this program … [T]hey said that I was out of the bussing area, so my daughter cannot get bussing and I have to bring her myself. I’d like more accessible bussing, or else more room in the program so that she could have [gone] to the program that was in our area …

Therefore, the fact that the program is provided free of charge to Aboriginal families facilitates the transition, in that families are not burdened with the additional financial stress of childcare fees. Likewise, the location of the centre (adjacent to where many families live) also makes the transition easier. Nonetheless, the location also causes some anxiety in families, because they worry about their children's safety due to the centre's proximity to an inner-city area where many social problems are endemic. Furthermore, the fact that the program is identified as being for Aboriginal children also appears to orientate them towards the program, as they believe that they can identify with the goals of the program.

Theme 2: Intergenerational impacts

The legacy of residential schooling and child removal practices (that, as a result, see Aboriginal children over-represented in care) resonates in the lives of many of these family members². Describing one of the consequences, a parent commented:

Through the years the languages weren’t allowed. They weren’t allowed to use their culture [in] the residential schools where [they] were taken and put in to white society, [so] many people lost their culture. Like me … I’m a quarter Cree and I have no history, [no] Aboriginal history. I have none.

Also, a loss of parenting skills was one of the serious impacts of this legacy. When children are removed from their families, how can they learn to parent, when they themselves have not been parented in the residential school? As a result, Aboriginal communities have been rebuilding their traditional family structures and values. This is evident in the number of parents who indicated that they had attended intervention programs for families at risk, prior to coming to the Aboriginal Head Start program. Thus, it is perhaps to be expected that there is a degree of tension within families and communities when it comes to enrolling children in structured early childhood programs. As one caregiver remarked:

A lot of parents are scared. A lot of parents have anxieties, be it [that] we’re going to report them to the Ministry [that deals with child and family services], or that we monitor parents and how they’re raising their child … We’re not here to judge them.

In trying to build parental trust, this caregiver also says:

We do tell [parents] if we suspect anything, we do let the Ministry know—but we are here to support them if they have a concern. [O]ur door is always open, because we’re not just going to report on any little things. We do understand [that] there are difficulties in everybody’s lives.

As was indicated earlier, early childhood care and education in First Nations communities has traditionally been a more shared, communal phenomenon, with extended family members having a role in raising children. Formal structures for child care and early childhood education are relatively new for Aboriginal families and communities. The parents and families in this study remain cautious about early childhood programming. One parent commented on their experience joining the program: ‘I was thinking the worst of this school. I didn’t think we should come … They taught me to become a better parent.’ Another parent relayed the intergenerational fear associated with schooling for Aboriginal children:

When my daughter became of age to go to school, I—my mom really—didn’t want me to send her to preschool. [S]he’ll spend enough time in school, but I really thought that she needed to be prepared for [the shock of] kindergarten.

² During the process of writing this paper, the Prime Minister of Canada made a formal apology on behalf of the people of Canada to Aboriginal peoples, for the abuse and injustices that they endured under the residential schooling system. A truth and reconciliation process is now underway, in an attempt to heal some of the deep emotional, psychological and spiritual scars that remain.
Thus, while the differing generational views are made apparent here, it is also noteworthy to recognise that transition to kindergarten from home is difficult for many children, and that early childhood programs attended prior to school can help children enter school less apprehensively and more confidently. Nevertheless, traditional beliefs and practices—wherein communal and more informal practices are the norm—still give families pause when they think about placing children in formal childcare settings.

Theme 3: Culture and identity

The erosion of Aboriginal knowledge, cultures and languages associated with policies and practices of schooling and child welfare has had a devastating impact on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal families and communities—where a struggle to find, foster or embrace their Aboriginal identity remains a constant challenge. One parent shared her painful journey as she grappled with her child’s initiation into the program:

I have this thing about Natives. I didn’t like them. I didn’t want to have anything to do with them. But I figured, well, just because I don’t like them doesn’t mean I have to keep her from that. So [the program] is helping us learn [about culture] … They got me into learning. I am learning how to appreciate who I am.

The participants frequently referred to the importance of Aboriginal culture and maintaining one’s Aboriginal identity. As one parent reported:

One day she just said to me, about two months ago … ’Mom, I’m an Indian.’ And she kind of looked sad when she said it, and I told her, ’You don’t have to be sad.’ I said, ’That’s a good thing … you have to be proud of who you are.’

As one of the early childhood educators commented, many of the parents and grandparents that bear the emotional and psychological scars of assimilation and colonial policies (such as the residential schools) ’might not have grown up that way’—that is, knowing about their language and heritage. As she saw it, ’having the Aboriginal Head Start program is going back to being proud of who we are.’

Some of the participants commented on the difficulty of maintaining one’s culture when living in an urban environment. Referring to the fact that it was ‘totally the culture that helped her feel at ease when her child came to the Aboriginal Head Start program, one parent elaborated:

Like me growing up—I grew up in the city … I was the only Aboriginal kid in the school, I was the only Aboriginal kid in my elementary school, and one other person in my high school was Aboriginal … So it’s really important, especially living in the city … because it’s so fast-paced, and because you don’t have a lot of culture around you, you’ve got to find it wherever you can.

Although they highly valued the cultural component of Aboriginal Head Start, participants also spoke of the challenges associated with implementing this aspect of the program in an urban centre. Language maintenance—or more accurately, language revitalisation—is especially challenging. For example, more than 20 different First Nations languages were represented by the families involved in the program at the centre where this study was conducted. Furthermore, there has been considerable loss of language, and in some First Nations communities, only elders speak the first language fluently. Although the children were being taught the language of the First Nation on whose traditional indigenous territory the program is located, one participant indicated, ‘I don’t think none of the participants [who attend this program] speak the language.’ The participant continued, ‘The children learn stuff from the teachers and they converse well [and] count, and [then] they go home and nobody [can support it].’ Since culture, identity and language are so inextricably linked, the language issue is particularly challenging in urban settings. It should be pointed out that there are ways around this problem, especially in locations where there is a concentration of speakers of a particular language. As one person stated:

I’m Nisga and our local community centre used to have language and culture classes … we used to have them in our common room once a week, and they [taught] the language and that was great—but it got cut, the funding got cut.

Although the families all strongly supported the focus on Aboriginal culture and language, they were also very pleased that their children were learning academic skills and school readiness. Indigenous people traditionally hold holistic world views on learning, and thus it is perhaps not surprising that they recognised the importance of academic skills alongside the Aboriginal teaching and learning.

One of the parents stated:

[Another nearby early childcare centre] was more like a play school—they didn’t kind of do lessons … [T]hey had stories and stuff, lessons that way. [H]ere I know that they do other things, and it is very structured.

These sentiments were echoed by another participant, who said:

I saw some of the handouts I was given when I was told about the program … [they talked about] children who attended a Head Start program versus children who didn’t attend Head Start, [what it was like] when they entered school and throughout school, [that] kind of thing … I wanted my kids to do as well as they could.
Discussion

The experience of transition for these Aboriginal families begins, as a process, well before they join a program. This is evident from the discussions where they grappled with the intergenerational legacy of formal schooling for Aboriginal people in Canada, which had shaped their views on early childhood education. There were several family members who showed concern about their children attending institutional forms of care, as their views had been tainted by the intergenerational impact of the residential schooling and child welfare policies that had had devastating consequences for generations of Aboriginal families. While the staff at the Aboriginal early childhood education program that we visited had made efforts to alleviate the fears of parents, they also acknowledged that these fears were well founded.

Aboriginal parents and family members must attend to the tensions that early childhood education evokes, as they consider early learning opportunities for their children and begin their transition into programs. Staff working in early childhood education settings should make sure that they are knowledgeable on the history of schooling and the forced child removal policies that disrupted generations of Aboriginal families in Canada. Knowledge of this colonial past will help early childhood educators to support Aboriginal family participation in their program. This includes preparing parents and children for the expectations and experiences of a program, easing their transition, and engaging parents in meaningful involvement. For example, parental fears of institutional forms of care that seem at odds with traditional values may require special outreach efforts on the part of early childhood educators. Meeting in family homes or Aboriginal communities and organisations can help parents to become comfortable with the notion of institutional care.

Forced to confront the painful legacy of colonialism, Aboriginal parents and family members place different expectations on the role of early childhood in their lives, which impacts program selection and transition experiences. The parent who rode by the centre on the bus was interested in the program after she saw that it was an ‘Indian program’. Many of the parents and family members who took part in this study described their desire for their children to have their Aboriginal identities nurtured. The program that their child attends, as one of its goals, is the support of Aboriginal culture and language. Some parents indicated that this played a role in choosing the early childhood setting and some family members told of how important this aspect of programming was to their children, grandchildren or foster children who attended the program. Staff of the Aboriginal Head Start, program conveyed that some of the children and parents in this particular Aboriginal early childhood education program were disconnected from their culture and language, and that the AHS program provided opportunities for them to learn about indigenous values, traditions and languages.

It is important that staff familiarise themselves with the culture and language of the children who come to their program. Integrating indigenous knowledge into program planning and implementation can help Aboriginal families to feel assured that their children’s identities are being fostered, as well as improve the quality of early learning experiences for Aboriginal children and families. Making indigenous knowledge a part of early childhood education experiences for Aboriginal children and families can be a particular challenge in urban settings, where access to cultural resources such as land, family, traditional practices and ancestral languages is often limited. However, it becomes the responsibility of early childhood education programs and parents to work together to ensure that indigenous ways of knowing and being are reflected in early learning settings.

Conclusion

Aboriginal parents, children and their family members may experience transition into early childhood education differently than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. While specific factors were found to facilitate family transitions—such as location, program cost, and transportation to and from the centre—the historical and social realities of Aboriginal parents play a significant role in the process of coming to early childhood programs, and also in how these parents navigate the transition. Aboriginal parents, children and family members may require different forms of support in their preparation and participation in early childhood education programs in order to have their needs met, as early childhood education plays an increasingly important role in the educational success of Aboriginal children.

References


Perceptions of school readiness in one Queensland primary school

Andrea M. Noel
The State University of New York at New Paltz

THIS ARTICLE REPORTS ON THE school-readiness perspectives of Prep teachers and school administrators at one primary school in southern Queensland, Australia. For the study, data were collected through qualitative interviews to determine the extent to which, and exactly how, the educators’ definitions were linked to the characteristics of the children, their families and caregivers, and the schools and communities. The results provide rich data that reveal the complex and broad definition of school readiness that has been embraced by the professionals at this school. This definition is aligned with the definition promoted by the current literature on school readiness. Interviewees communicated details about the roles and responsibilities of families, teachers, schools and communities when it came to supporting children’s school readiness.

Introduction

This research is part of a larger study on readiness and school transition programs and activities in Queensland, Australia. The USA author spent one term as a visiting professor at the studied primary school, in order to learn about Australian perspectives and practices related to school readiness, delayed school entry and early childhood school transition programs. This is the first of three papers on the perceptions of school readiness of Prep teachers and school administrators in this particular primary school in Queensland. In this report, the pseudonym ‘Beachside Primary’ will be used to refer to the school. Also, the Queensland term ‘Prep’ will be used to identify the first year of schooling, which is referred to as ‘kindergarten’ in the United States. Prep in Australia and kindergarten in most American states (Reed, 2001) is non-compulsory.

The research questions that guided this portion of the study include:

- What is the view on school readiness held by professionals in the case study school?
- To what extent is this view shared among the professionals in the school?
- How do the perspectives of this group of teachers and administrators relate to current broad definitions of school readiness promoted by Australian and USA researchers, policy briefs and professional organisations?

Literature review

In the past, views on school readiness have focused primarily on the characteristics of the child. School entry was considered ill-advised until the child possessed certain characteristics that were seen to be required for school success (Geselle, 1930, 1948; Ilg et al., 1978). Such maturational models placed the locus of responsibility for a child’s readiness almost entirely with the child. Parents were advised to give children who were perceived to be unready for school extra time to develop and were encouraged to keep them out of formal schooling for an extra year. This school of thought had a substantial impact on the American ideal of school readiness and the impact is still visible today (Noel & Newman, 2003, 2008). Beliefs about readiness that centre on child characteristics leave children and parents predominantly responsible for school readiness and transition.

Recent literature distinguishes between readiness for school and readiness for learning (Kagan & Rigby, 2003; McTurf et al., 2008). Readiness for learning is considered an innate human characteristic and includes ‘the domains
of physical development, intellectual ability, and emotional maturity and health’ (Kagan & Rigby, 2003, p. 1). Readiness for school is broader and often focuses on the skills and characteristics that children possess at one point in time—specifically language and thinking skills.

Research literature and policy documents in both Australia and the United States now support a wider definition of school readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2009; Farrar, Goldfield & Moore, 2007; Hair, Halle, Terry-Humen, Lavelle & Calkins, 2006; McBryde, Ziviani & Cuskelly, 2004: National Association for the Education of Young Children – (NAEYC), 2004; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Royal Children’s Hospital, 2008). The newer and broader definition acknowledges the responsibilities of the school and community in regards to school readiness; the impact of parental characteristics and practices; and different definitions of readiness across communities (Graue, 1993, 2006).

The concept of ‘ready’ schools and communities concerns the ability of schools to meet the needs of children with diverse backgrounds, knowledge and experiences. The school is nested within the community, larger society and governmental structure. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) discuss such bi-directional impacts within their ecological systems framework. The practices and policies of each of these entities directly and indirectly impact children. Schools and curricula must be designed to meet children’s individual learning needs, and communities and governments can support readiness by offering various levels and types of support—as well as opportunities that assist parents and caregivers in meeting the developmental needs of young children (Dockett & Perry, 2009; Kagan & Rigby, 2003; NAEYC, 2004). In addition, the concept of school readiness is linked with school transition programs—which are established to encourage a seamless experience for children moving into school. Margetts (2002) identified one of the characteristics of effective school transition programs as continuity between children’s prior school experiences and their Prep experiences. A vision of readiness that is shared by all stakeholders (family, school, community, government) is needed to support this continuity.

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is Australia’s primary early childhood professional organisation. However, a search on the ECA website for ECA position statements or policy briefs on school readiness yielded no results. The US equivalent to ECA is the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). NAEYC promotes a very broad and flexible definition of readiness, which includes:

- emphasis on the variability between growth and general development rates among children
- the necessity to include areas of learning and development beyond language and mathematics skills (such as physical, social and emotional competence, and healthy attitudes toward school)
- the inclusion of dimensions of readiness not related to the children themselves—such as ‘ready families, ready communities, ready care and ready schools’ (see NAEYC, 2004).

Policy and position statements of Australian educational and health organisations linked to the ECA website, as well as the website of Education Queensland (www.education.qld.gov), offers additional resources on conceptions of readiness. The policy briefs on readiness (#10) and transition (#11) published by the Royal Children’s Hospital (RCH) in 2008, as well as the school readiness report from the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (Farrar, Goldfeld & Moore, 2007), both endorse a broad definition of school readiness. Farrar et al. (2007) calls models that base school readiness on individual children’s maturity ‘limited’.

The materials published by the state of Queensland that were reviewed for this paper—which include the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (EYCG) for Queensland (Connell, Shearer & Tobin, 2006) and the Early Phase of Learning Action Plan (Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2007)—do not comment directly on the definition of school readiness. However, these documents are consistent with the broad definition of school readiness. For example, the EYCG includes a list of events and experiences that influence children before their Prep year, and states that ‘by the time children enter the Preparatory year, their development will already be influenced by many complex and interacting factors’ (p. 2). The EYCG supports the notion that children can be best served if teachers and administrators understand the experiences that they had before they entered school. Teachers are encouraged to ‘build on children’s prior learning in other settings’, as well as consider children’s diverse social and cultural understandings. The Early Phase of Learning Action Plan (Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2007) identifies a series of ‘Action Areas’, including a section on community that states: ‘A shared understanding of how young children learn in the early phase of learning exists between the school and community’ (p. 8).

Thus, recent conceptions of readiness promote shared responsibility in helping young children be prepared for school. While remnants of notions of readiness that are based solely on children’s characteristics still remain, current definitions in research, and within policy and position statements of education and health agencies, support a broader definition that includes ready children, ready families, ready schools and ready communities (Dockett & Perry, 2009; RCH, 2008).

**Method**

Beachside Primary School is located in the state of Queensland, in a middle-class suburban community less than 100 km from a large east-coast Australian city.
The school includes a primary and secondary campus and serves a total of approximately 1100 students from Prep through to Year 12, with a maximum class size of 25 students in the grades Prep through to Year 3. The school’s website indicates that the predominant management style is consultative and that the school uses a shared decision-making model.

Prep is the first year of schooling in Queensland. Children are eligible for Prep if they reach the age of five by 30 June in the year that they join a Prep class (the school year begins in January). Universal full-day Prep is new to Queensland, having been first incorporated into the primary school organisation throughout the state of Queensland at the start of the 2007 school year (Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2006). Prep children attend a full school day, five days a week. Prior to 2007, preschools were state funded—but in some instances, they were located away from the primary school. Also, children attended preschool only two or three days per week. Instruction in Prep is guided by the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (Connell, Shearer & Tobin, 2006), which are available through the Education Queensland website. Curricula and policies related to early education are developed by the state of Queensland. The organisation that writes these policies is either the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) or the Education Queensland Curriculum Branch.

This study is descriptive and utilises a single-case, qualitative design (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The case under investigation was one particular primary school, and the goal of this paper is to describe the readiness perceptions and definitions of the Prep teachers and administrators at this one school. Of particular interest to the researcher was how broadly these educators define school readiness—especially the perceived responsibilities of the family, school, community and any other person or entity. School readiness is a fairly well understood construct, therefore this study had a structure prior to its commencement (as opposed to a loosely-structured study which derives structure from the data). Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to this as deductive versus inductive design and argue that both are needed in educational research. This study’s deductive qualitative design was organised around the three major research questions, and an interview protocol based on these questions was created. Each interviewee was asked all questions—however, conversations did vary and the researcher encouraged relevant sideline conversations.

This case study design was utilised in order to fully understand all of the conceptions of readiness within Beachside Primary. Therefore, interviews were sought with all teachers and administrators involved in either teaching Prep or administering any aspect of the Prep or school transition program. This included the primary school principal, two deputy principals, a curriculum expert and three Prep teachers. One Prep teacher was not approached (as per the advice of the building principal) due to personal difficulties. Most of the interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed by the author immediately afterwards. In cases where it was not possible or desirable to tape record the interview, the author took detailed notes, which were immediately transcribed. For all interviews, the author returned either the interview transcription or the detailed notes to the interviewee for comment. Interviewees were encouraged to make any changes, to clarify their responses, or add more information. When necessary, the researcher asked for elaboration. For example, there was some concern that the interviewer had biased the subjects’ responses toward aspects of readiness which revolved around child characteristics. For this reason, the majority of the interviewees were approached a second time and asked to elaborate on any factors that were not directly related to a child characteristic that she or he believed was related to school readiness. When all of the transcribed interviews and detailed notes had been returned, the transcripts were edited. There were only minor adjustments requested by the interviewees. Next, each interview transcript was assigned a number, to ensure anonymity (see Table 1). Any data pertaining to readiness were extracted from the interviews and coded with the categories of ‘child’, ‘family’, ‘school’, ‘community’ or ‘other’. The analysis tables have one line for each interviewee and columns relating to each code category. This condensed the data (as recommended by Miles & Huberman, 1994), and allowed for easy description of the factors related to the child, family, school and community characteristics that the interviewees perceived to be important. It also illuminated the differences and similarities in the responses of the interviewees, as well as any patterns in the responses.

Table 1. Interviewee information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee number</th>
<th>Job title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Administrator—Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Administrator—Deputy Principal for Years 4–6, but had duties related to school entry procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Administrator—Deputy Principal for Years P–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Administrator—Curriculum Coordinator for Years P–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Prep Teacher</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Prep Teacher</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Prep Teacher</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Results

Analysis of the interview data addressed all three of the research questions:

- How do these educators view readiness?
- To what extent are the views shared between administrators and teachers?
- How do the perspectives of this group of educators relate to the currently accepted broad definition of school readiness promoted by both Australian and American professional organisations, literature and position statements/policy briefs?

These educators identified children’s social-emotional traits and a predisposition to learning as the most important child characteristics. An ability to perform well in pre-academics (including knowing colors, having pre-literacy or pre-numeracy skills) was not seen to be largely related to school readiness. Social-emotional readiness and predisposition to learning were not seen to exist in isolation. Children’s experiences prior to Prep were identified as crucial in the development of these traits, and the school, family, community and government were all seen to play important roles in supporting children’s school readiness.

Only occasionally were differences noted between the general responses of the teachers and administrators. The results, with quotes, are summarised below. The interviewees are referred to by number and this section is organised individually around those quotes related to the readiness of the child, family, school and community.

Child

Social-emotional skills (which include the ability to get along with unfamiliar children and adults; to separate from caregivers; to take responsibility for oneself; and to accept and follow directions) and a predisposition to school learning were the most commonly identified child traits that interviewees associated with school readiness. These abilities were often linked to the child’s experiences prior to Prep—especially preschool.

Negotiating the demands of the Prep classroom was believed to be aided by a child’s ability to cooperate and relate well with other children and adults. Representative of comments by others, Interviewee #4 remarked:

There is some certain level of socialisation with other kids and with unknown adults that they would need to have in order to be able to engage in a school setting … so they can cope with the disconnection with their parents and not be isolated … It is getting used to that routine [where] they will be passed from one adult to another. Part of that is having the level of resilience to deal with the separation from their parents.

Interviewee #6 agrees: ‘It is important that they can relate to other adults and not be scared. Maybe they have had experience with other children, perhaps by attending a preschool.’

Another frequently reported child attribute was the ability to take responsibility for oneself, and to communicate one’s needs, as well as take direction. Interviewee #7 remarks that ‘readiness is the child taking responsibility to be the best at what he/she is good at, and continuing to try to improve those things. Readiness is the expectation that they will succeed.’ However, Interviewee #7 sees readiness not as a prerequisite for her Prep class but something that she is working on with the children during the entire year of Prep. Interviewee #2 interprets this aspect of children’s readiness as follows:

If I am describing a kid that would be ready, they would obviously be keen for direction and boundaries … They would probably feel comfortable with having clear boundaries and clear instructions.

Taking responsibility for oneself is also important to Interviewee #5, who states that a ready child ‘is a little organised, and can get things out of the lunch box, for example. She/he has some control and can do these types of things.’ These quotes all portray a child who has a certain ability to be independent. From this point of view, one is ready for a classroom setting when there is no constant need for assistance in regards to activities or negotiating boundaries. Interrelated with these skills is the ability to appropriately ask for assistance when necessary.

Four of the seven interviewees identified a ‘predisposition to learning’ or a ‘curiosity’ as basic to all other child characteristics. Interviewee #5 remarked:

Curiosity is important. They need to be ‘comfy in their own skins’. A little person like this would be happy; [be] keen to join in; [be] curious; [would] want to try new things; [be] cautious, but then take off and start discovering; make things; and be independent.

A predisposition to learning was identified as much more important than academic skills or knowledge, as Interviewee #4 reports:

In regards to the learning side, I don’t see that there is necessarily any prerequisite knowledge of literacy or numeracy that they need other than eagerness and keenness, or a natural curiosity about learning. With that as a background, we can do a lot with them in their first year.

Interviewee #1 agrees:

I think that it is about that predisposition to learning. I mean, it is fantastic if they have that home background that values schooling, and that
has given them some background in literacy and numeracy—but you don’t expect that the parents are actually going to be teaching the children anything in a formal way.

Thus, there is support from this data for identifying the child characteristics which teachers and administrators in this school believe are important in readiness for school. However, the above quotes tell only a partial story. Both ‘in-between the lines’ and explicitly, these educators strongly communicated their beliefs that child characteristics are by no means the only topic to discuss within the subject of school readiness. They talked passionately of encouraging the age-appropriate school attendance of all children—no matter their cognitive, behavioral, experiential or other characteristics. In addition, they discussed the relationship of readiness to families, schools, communities and governments. An impressive result from these interviews is the amount of emphasis that these educators put on the necessity for schools, communities and governments to support children’s school readiness.

Family

Five of the seven interviewees commented on the role of families in supporting children’s school readiness. Different responsibilities include giving children a range of experiences, supporting the role of the education institution, and helping children to feel comfortable with the notion of schooling. Interviewees also mentioned the need for the parents themselves to be ready for being separated from their child.

Offering children a variety of experiences was cited as important by three interviewees. Interviewees #2, #3 and #4 talked about supporting readiness by spending time with children. For example, Interviewee #3 stated:

It’s about the parents who are out in the yard to throw the ball around with their kids. Families can help by exercising their kids’ fine and gross motor skills. They can take them outside and play with them. They can give them many experiences, such as taking them to the library and talking with them. The oral language component is so important.

The importance of supporting a child’s school readiness by communicating the positive values of schooling and the role of educators, was discussed by three of the administrators and none of the Prep teachers. Interviewee #2 said:

The family should have openness to education, and value education. It should also support the school on a system level ... (and) see education as a service that, at its core, is there to meet the needs of their children—not to indoctrinate them.

Interviewee #1 concurred, ‘It is fantastic if they have got that home background that values schooling ...

Interviewee #4 also agreed, ‘It is my personal belief that parents hold the biggest role in enabling their child to feel comfortable in the transition to school.’

Two teachers mentioned the role of families in supporting readiness by referring to parents who were not ready to separate from their children, and expressed their perception that this negatively impacted the child’s school readiness and adjustment. Interviewee #5 said, ‘The hardest thing is that at a point in time, a kid needs to be ready—sometimes parents themselves are not ready.’

If interviewees mentioned the role of the family in supporting children’s readiness for school, they talked about the positive impact that a rich family environment can have on children’s readiness. Administrators were more likely to comment on the role of families in supporting the work of the school—but in general, these educators placed much emphasis on the duties of the school in supporting readiness through creating an environment where all children could be well served.

School

The role of the school in supporting readiness, while not seen in isolation, was emphasised. Teachers and administrators spoke of supporting readiness by encouraging the school entry of all children, regardless of their characteristics. Interviewee #2 discussed the school’s responsibility to ‘provide teachers that have a high level of technical skill and [who are] also warm and nurturing’, and ‘to provide the appropriate facilities and resources.’ This administrator also added that ‘families need to be informed about how things are done in the school.’ Interviewee #3 added:

It is about the whole child, the social-emotional and how we link it all together, and the culture we create in our school environment to make it happen for our kids. It’s how we present those and enact those in our classrooms that reflect the needs of the children within our community.

Teachers and administrators responded passionately when asked about their role in supporting all levels of readiness. Interviewee #7 summed this up simply by saying, ‘Readiness happens [through] what I do in the Prep classroom. I tell children that my main job is to create a marvellous environment ...’ However, some teachers and administrators also talked about the challenges that they face in implementing their professional knowledge of how to appropriately teach in an early childhood classroom. These concerns revolved around pressure to teach in a way that was deemed to be developmentally inappropriate. This is discussed below as a community factor, since it involves not what teachers are doing or think they should be doing, but rather the influence of the outside community on their practice.
Community and government

The community and government responsibilities related to children’s readiness for school were shared by five of the seven educators interviewed. These comments concerned the need for the community to support early education, for more government financial support for families, and for greater alignment between curricula and testing.

The role of the community in supporting the development of environments that help families enrich children’s experiences was addressed by Interviewee #3:

We need to do some backward thinking [sic]. As a community, we need to consider what we want our children to be like. Do we want happy children who can help create a better world? Then we need to support families to create those environments for children … Parks and other positive community facilities should be designed to support families. There should be green areas in communities. People will love their communities and feel ownership of them.

Interviewee #7 identifies the community’s perception of early education and the need to change that perception:

There is a saying that you can teach a monkey to do tricks … I don’t want to be such a teacher. Some of the community’s perception [comes] from very targeted marketing [promoting] skill-based instruction from preschools. That is not readiness.

Financial assistance for families was identified by two interviewees as an important part of supporting school readiness. Interviewee #4 responded:

I am very satisfied with the government’s approach on immunisation and the bonus payments you get once you get the child immunised … once you have done that, you get a cheque in the mail. I guess it strongly encourages people to do it … The government is involved in readiness by providing an immunisation schedule and providing basic health services.

Two of the three teachers interviewed spoke about difficulties related to the implementation of their teaching philosophies, which are in line with the play-based curriculum advocated in the Early Years Guidelines published by the state of Queensland but felt that pressure from the public and the testing system created obstacles to this goal.

Interviewee #7 agrees and relates her concern that the public, as well as some teachers, misunderstand the early years curriculum. If those within the school don’t understand a play-based curriculum, how will the community? One of the administrators, Interviewee #1, acknowledged that, ‘[t]here is still a lot of pressure about literacy and numeracy’, and that children must, ‘have the social skills to get on with others and to get on with adults, to be able to learn literacy and numeracy in the first place’. These educators had the desire to implement the Early Years Guidelines published by the state of Queensland but felt that pressure from the public and the testing system created obstacles to this goal.

Other

Two interviewees were hesitant to discuss determinants of school readiness. Interviewee #7 intimated:

Readiness is acknowledging [that] there are huge differences among children. What is readiness for a particular child? The biggest problem with readiness is that I don’t want society to rob childhood from children. If I say there are prerequisites to Prep, where is childhood going? I don’t want them institutionalising children from ages two and three.

Interviewee #3 added, ‘Well, I think readiness is probably one of those—if you deconstruct the terminology of it … it is like every aspect of language [and] is never innocent.’

These results reveal a broad and multi-dimensional view of readiness among the teachers and administrators in this school. Child characteristics that make school adjustment easier—such as those obtained through experiences in preschool—were identified as related to school readiness. However, these educators communicated a strong belief in applying the concept of readiness beyond the child. They were particularly cognisant of the school and the teachers’ need to be ready for the children, as well as the family and community responsibilities involved in supporting readiness.

Discussion

An important finding from this research is the fact that the definition of school readiness held by the educators at this particular school is close to the definition represented in current early education literature.
Namely, that school readiness includes much more than the characteristics that children present on the first day of school—it includes ready children, ready families, ready schools and ready communities (Dockett & Perry, 2009; Kagan & Rigby, 2003; RCH, 2008).

The broad definition of readiness held by these teachers and administrators translated into a willingness to accept all children at the Prep doorstep—no matter their background or characteristics. However, interviewees did acknowledge the child characteristics that they believe support success in Prep, as well as later in school. Some of the interviewees were so willing to support all children that they showed an obvious hesitance to discuss school readiness at all, due to their concerns about the negative consequences for children if an idea of ‘readiness’ is translated into Prep requirements.

The child characteristics identified by the participants in this research were consistent with the findings of Dockett and Perry (2001) and Hair et al. (2006). The teachers and administrators gave primary importance to a child’s ability to be socially adjusted within the school environment. All seven of the interviewees in this study identified social-emotional issues as key to readiness for school. The most common of these included the ability to:
- cooperate and relate well with others
- separate from primary caregivers
- communicate needs
- take direction.

In addition to this, four of the seven very enthusiastically discussed the primary importance of a predisposition and/or enthusiasm for learning as a fundamental aspect of school readiness.

**Recommendations for policy**

The teachers’ and administrators’ philosophy on school readiness is linked with their professional knowledge about high-quality early education and is in line with the EYCG. However, they did not feel that others shared their understandings of appropriate early education. These findings support the need for continued attention to the meeting of Action 10 in Queensland’s Early Phase of Learning Action Plan (Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2007), which states that schools should ‘[e]stablish and maintain strategies and practices to inform the community about the school’s early phase of learning strategies.’ These results show that continued attention must be given by state governments to educating the general public regarding appropriate early education—so that the public can better support the type of instruction outlined in the EYCG. Caregivers who want the best for their children may be inadvertently sending them to preschool programs that are not aligned with the EYCG, thereby supporting a type of school readiness that is much more skill-based—and, in the eyes of the educators, not optimally preparing them for school. Research-based information on high-quality early childhood programs needs to reach not only the teachers and the teaching aides that teach the programs, but also the caregivers who are enrolling their children into these programs. The Dockett and Perry (2009) and RCH (2008) definition of school readiness was largely accepted and implemented by the educators in this Queensland school. Now the public needs to accept this definition, and demand that all preschool and Prep programs provide effective developmentally appropriate educational programs in alignment with the EYCG.

While the RCH policy brief #10 (2008) is a very useful document and the curriculum materials from Education Queensland embody the principles of that brief (similar to the position statement from NAECY on school readiness), it would be helpful if Early Childhood Australia, as the leading early childhood association in Australia, had a formal position statement on school readiness in place and readily available on its website. As a newcomer to early childhood programs in Australia (which any caregiver, new teacher or teaching aide might be), this author initially found it difficult to locate a strong position on readiness that spoke for leading Australian early childhood professionals. ECA might consider formally endorsing a position statement—such as the RCH Policy Brief on readiness (2008)—or possibly creating its own statement based on RCH's brief and Dockett and Perry's detailed 2009 article on the contemporary view of readiness. Then, a re-evaluation of the ECA website links (to determine if all of the links agree with the policy brief) would be useful. This way, the public, early childhood educators and policy-makers across Australia and the world would have easy access to expert, research-based information. Cross-cultural research would also be supported, with material that represents Australian expertise readily available on such a website.

**Limitations and conclusion**

The results of this study are not subject to generalisation beyond the case-study school, due to the qualitative nature of this research. Research into the extent to which educators in general interpret readiness must utilise a representative sample. In addition, qualitative studies undertaken with educators in diverse communities are needed to fully understand how readiness is defined across Queensland and Australia.

The teachers and administrators interviewed in this study embraced the broad definition of school readiness as identified in both current research and
policy literature. Primary schools would benefit from further study of conceptions of readiness within the greater community. The best outcomes for children are associated with continuity of experience—which would be supported by the sharing of readiness definitions and responsibilities by families, schools and the community.

The information from this study will also be useful for comparing these conceptions of readiness with those of other communities across Australia and in other countries. Of particular interest to this author is the extent to which interviews with American teachers and administrators at a comparable American community would share the broad definition of school readiness espoused by the educators at Beachside Primary.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to extend sincere thanks to the teachers and administrators in Queensland, especially those at Beachside Primary, who generously shared their perspectives and time.

References


Introduction

GLOBALISATION HAS A PROFOUN D impact on all facets of our lives. It is defined in various ways—from social, economic and cultural perspectives. For instance, some definitions of globalisation include perspectives on language, westernisation and consumerism (e.g. Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006; Waters, 1995), while other definitions consider transnational corporations, global economies and global culture (e.g. Boli & Lechner, 2001; Sklair, 1999). Economic and technological aspects predominate in various definitions of globalisation, with only a few meanings incorporating cultural perspectives (Tierney, 2004; Wolf, 2000). There is limited discussion surrounding the social and cultural impacts of globalisation on families and children (Carrington, 2008). As argued by Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) (p. 1), ‘[T]he family is an important unit to be considered when analysing the social or cultural impacts of globalisation, from both a local and global perspective.’

One of the major consequences of globalisation is increased transnational transportation, and the migration of people to Western and industrialised societies (Castles & Miller, 1998; Papastergiadis, 2000). Migration is described as a complex process for families, as it involves many psychological and sociocultural adaptations. The obvious impact of migration on families is the geographical dispersion of the family, which has significant effects on households, family structures and their daily practices (Parrenas, 2005; Roizblatt & Pilowsky, 2005; Wahyuni, 2005). Furthermore, migration, especially to Western countries, seems to contribute to the liberation of women from non-Western cultures, which eventually alters their relationships within their family and their parenting interactions in the host country (Izuhara & Shibata, 2002).

Each family has a set of cultural norms and practices associated with bringing up children. Parenting is a term that is used to refer to the values, attitudes, practices, discourses and interactions associated with raising children in each cultural group (Wise & da Silva, 2007). It is conceptualised in the local contexts of family, society and culture (Roer-Strier & Rosenthal, 2001). Children are acculturated into their family’s cultural value system through parenting and parental discourses and interactions (Timimi, 2005). Parenting in immigrant families tends to be integrated with their traditional culture (Guo, 2006; Wise & da Silva, 2007). However, cultural changes are possible in immigrant families’ thinking and living patterns as they become exposed to hybridised forms of multicultural life in a global world (Singh, 2005). For instance, in a global context, families with young children are likely to foster the value of competition in children—because academic success and individual accomplishments are more valued.
in these new times (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). Globalisation is promoting the English language, and the values of consumerism and individualism across the globe (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). Such values can contradict the traditional and family-centred values of cooperation and interdependence that are prevalent in many non-Western immigrant families—for example, those found in Asian families (Guo, 2006). Exposure to global cultures can lead to ‘cultural hybridisation’, with families adopting diverse cultural norms and practices (Kuran & Sandholm, 2003).

The cultural influences of cultural globalisation on families need to be acknowledged in the new era (South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework, SACSA, 2001). This paper on the cultural effects of globalisation—and more specifically, on parenting—is timely and justified. It aims to foster discussion on the cultural implications of globalisation for parenting in immigrant families and how globalisation can promote what this paper terms as ‘hybridised parenting’ in immigrant families. The term immigrant is used in this paper to refer to families who have voluntarily decided to leave their home country (Arzubiaga, Noguerón & Sullivan, 2009).

The paper is organised into three sections. The first section discusses the cultural impacts of globalisation on parenting in immigrant families. The second discusses the notion of ‘hybridised parenting’, using the global culture model (Featherstone, 1992 cited in Sklair, 1999) and concepts of cultural integration (Kuran & Sandholm, 2003) and hybridisation (Young, 1990) detailed later in this paper. The literature published on non-Western immigrant parenting is used to further support the notion of hybridised parenting. The third and last section of this paper presents the implications of hybridity in parenting for children’s development and early childhood practices, followed by conclusions.

**Cultural implications of globalisation for parenting in immigrant families**

Globalisation is exerting a significant impact on families, via migration. Through migration, families will be compelled to negotiate a range of local and global forces (Robertson, 1995). Additionally, some non-Western or non-English-speaking families face dilemmas and decisions relating to the maintenance of their home language and traditional cultural practices—issues that Western or English-speaking immigrants do not need to face in their host country (Guadalupe & Valdes, 1996 cited in Adair & Tobin, 2008). Furthermore, many ‘visible minority’ immigrants have to undergo a more tempestuous acculturative process because they are at a risk of many potential stressors, such as racial stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination’ (Chun, 1995, Suzuki, 1995 cited in Li, 2001, p. 479). Migration can change the ways in which a family operates in the new country (Wahyuni, 2005). Changes to how the family functions can affect how parents care, nurture and acculturate their children into the values of their traditional culture (Wahyuni, 2005).

Globalisation is also impacting on families through global media and information technologies, which have become the new means of socialisation for today’s families (McCade & Wortham, 2004). As stated in the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSA, 2001, pp. 5–6):

> … exposure to globalised cultures through the media, consumer products and information technologies can challenge traditional structures, and that exposure to diverse cultures, both locally and globally, can impact on individual and group identities. It is almost impossible to be isolated from the products, images and messages that circulate around the globe, and merge with established traditions and practices to shape new meanings and cultures.

The traditional practices and social forms cannot be taken for granted in a globalised era (Giddens, 1999). As stated by McCade (2001), household environments are mediators of cultural change. When immigrant families are exposed to diverse cultural practices of parenting, they may initially resist cultural changes (Goldman, 1993 cited in Roer-Strier & Rosenthal, 2001). However, they will be compelled to make changes in their cultural values and practices as they face cultural dilemmas in parenting. Cultural changes in individuals are possible—either through behavioural adaptations or changes to the socialisation practices of families, or through the self-persuasions of individuals (Kuran & Sandholm, 2003). These cultural adaptations, according to Kuran and Sandholm, lead to cultural integration and the creation of hybrid cultures.

However, not all immigrant families adapt to cultural changes—some families refuse to integrate and conform to the dominant cultural changes and expectations. Such attempts to refuse integration into host cultures lead to a diasporic group (Lindridge, Hogg & Shah, 2004). Diasporic groups occur when immigrant families aim to maintain connections with their home cultures (Bhatia, 2002). It seems plausible that improved communication technologies would enable immigrants to maintain their cultural practices and identity. On the contrary—rapid transportation and sophisticated communication technologies across the globe appear to exacerbate cultural integration and hybridisation, rather than promote diasporas (Carrington, 2002). Achieving cultural continuity in traditional practices and expectations of parenting is noted to be quite challenging, even for diaspora groups, as both immigrant children and families are required to make cultural adaptations in order to operate in a host country (Baptise, 2005). Furthermore, the attitudes and views of society towards diversity and cultural pluralism can also influence an immigrant family’s decision on whether to assimilate or to resist cultural integration (Adams & Kirova, 2007).
It appears that cultural integration is already evident in many societies around the world—as it is unstoppable it is likely to remain in the future as well (Kuran & Sandholm, 2003). Cultural integration, or cultural hybridisation, appears to be the trend in the 21st century—with important consequences for immigrant families (and their parenting) in multicultural societies such as Australia. Therefore, the questions to be asked are: Is globalisation leading to hybridised parenting in immigrant families? In what ways does globalisation promote hybridity in parenting? Applying the notions of cultural integration and hybridity to families, the next section explores the trends of hybridised parenting in immigrant families.

**Is globalisation leading to hybridised parenting?**

As argued in the previous section, cultural integration appears to be a phenomenon of the 21st century—with important consequences for immigrant families. Immigrant families tend to preserve their traditional parenting values and practices in their host country (Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). However, through their migration, families are also compelled to negotiate both local and global influences on parenting—a concept referred to as ‘glocalisation’ by Robertson (1996). Immigrant families try to adapt to the cultural clash between their traditional values and the global-cultural values of parenting in their host country—either by integrating or assimilating into the dominant culture, or by creating new cultural practices. Such cultural adaptations by immigrant families can promote hybridity in their parenting practices.

The term ‘hybridity’ refers to the creation of new practices, through the intermixing of the old and the new practices (Young, 1990). It also refers to the process of changes to, adaptations of and emergence of new meanings (Jones Diaz, 2005). Integration of new cultural elements into one’s own culture tends to promote cultural hybridisation and homogenisation of cultures (Boli & Lechner, 2001).

As outlined in the previous section, global forces such as mass media culture and information technologies appear to exacerbate cultural integration and hybridity. Nearly 50 years ago, McLuhan (1962) highlighted how mass media culture exposes families and children across the globe to the same cultural messages and images via global electronics—for example, media and the internet. The ‘global culture’ approach (Featherstone, 1990, Waters, 1995 cited in Sklair, 1999) highlights the implications of mass-media culture on families and children. It assumes that many people in the globalised world will be exposed to the same cultural messages and images. It is believed that this mass-media culture has led to the hybridisation and homogenisation of world cultures, and the emergence of what McLuhan (1962) called a ‘global village’. The term ‘global village’ refers to the interconnections among people that occur via global electronic networks—for example, media and the internet. The international flow of media images and cultural products has important consequences for families. Today’s media culture and information and communication technologies carry a number of Western values. Although these cultural values are not directly transferable to other cultures, Suoranta (2003) emphasises that they can still exert their influence on other cultures via global media.

The global culture approach also highlights the influences of Western cultural forms on the cultures of non-Western societies, which occurs through its two dimensions:

a) expressive (e.g. media, consumable goods, products)

b) normative cultures (e.g. the values and goals of consumerism and individualism) (Boli & Lechner, 2001, p. 6262).

The idea of cultural hybridisation arose surrounding the debates on what happens when people and items from different cultures interact with each other (Hall et al., 1992 cited in Sklair, 1999). Increased cross-cultural contact can promote cultural hybridisation. Hybridisation in turn leads to the development of new cultural understandings. Cultural hybridity ‘is always, like all acts of identity, a question of practice, the practice of attributing meaning. It can be understood only in terms of its social contexts and the way in which acts of identification are motivated’ (Friedman, 1997 cited in Jones Diaz, 2005, p. 85.).

Globalisation is also promoting the values of consumerism, materialistic aspirations, competition, individualism, academic success and a pressure to learn English as the global language (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). Furthermore, as Kanner (n.d.) says, it is subjecting today’s parents and children to the ‘pester power’ of the global market. Families and children are now exposed to the objects and items that are globally valued and desired, such as computer games, mobile phones and popular brands of clothing (Kanner, n.d.). The corporate culture is forcing people to believe that happiness is tied to material goods and Kanner (n.d.) refers to this phenomenon as ‘corporate materialism’. People feel pressured to acquire material goods in a globalised world. An increased focus on material aspirations can alter the traditional and collectivistic goals, values and attitudes of parenting that are prevalent among many non-Western cultures.

Globalisation and its various aspects—such as global media, technology and capitalism—are also changing the cultural conceptions of childhood and gender (Carrington, 2008; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). The corporate constructions of childhood (Kasturi, 2002 cited in Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006), for example, can force families to promote materialistic values in children. The traditional cultural concepts of childhood are changing in many societies. The new constructions of childhood, as argued by Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) are defined by ‘Western values of childhood, which further homogenise childhood as white,
Western, urban and middle class’ (p. 56). These new global constructions of childhood tend to impact on parenting practices adopted by parents in current times.

The global forces, along with migration to the West, can lead to rapid transitions for non-Western families—going from a traditional lifestyle to a more Western lifestyle or acculturation (Berry, 1994). Research has indicated that immigrant parents experience many difficulties in their parenting roles, which arise from the diversity in child rearing of their host country (Baptise, 2005). Immigrant parents, therefore, experience acculturative stress arising from issues with maintaining their home language, cultural values, norms and practices in their host country (Berry, 1994).

Immigrant parents tend to use a range of coping strategies to fit into the existing culture and society, as well as to deal with the acculturative stress. According to Harrison, Wilson, pine, Chan and Buriel (1990 cited in Jambunathan & Counselman, 2002), some parents use ‘biculuralism’ as a form of adaptation. This refers to people’s ability to adapt to two different sets of cultural expectations. Other parents use strategies of ‘family extendedness, role flexibility in parenting, and instruction in ancestral world views’ (Hall, 1992; Waters, 1995 cited in Carrington, 2002, p. 658). Family extendedness and role flexibility refer to the support system network that families use to solve problems during difficult times, whereas ancestral world views refer to the transmission of traditional cultural and family values to younger generations—for example, through daily practices or interactions (Jambunathan & Counselman, 2002, p. 658).

In a global context, immigrant parents are compelled to embrace new cultural values into their parenting, as their traditional practices may be perceived as outdated and obsolete in a host country (Adams & Kirova, 2007). In order to fit into the host country, they are more likely to accept new cultures and develop new forms of culture, which is referred to as ‘cultural translation’ (Hall, 1992; Waters, 1995 cited in Carrington, 2002). Cultural translation or hybridity in the parenting practices of immigrants is thus inevitable. So, what evidence is there to support the argument for hybridisation of parenting in immigrant families? The next section extends an argument for ‘hybridised parenting’, utilising published literature on parenting by non-Western immigrants.

Is there any evidence in support of hybridised parenting in immigrant families?

To support the view that parenting practices of immigrant families tend to be hybridised, Jambunathan and Counselman’s (2002) study on parenting attitudes and practices indicated that Indian immigrant mothers in the USA did not favour the use of corporal punishment for guiding their children, compared to mothers in India. There were also contrasting differences in parenting styles, with Indian immigrant mothers in the USA adopting authoritarian styles, while mothers in India preferred authoritative styles of parenting (Baumrind & Black, 1967). Other studies also confirmed the changes in the traditional child-rearing practices among USA and Canadian Chinese immigrants (Lin & Fu, 1990, Li, 2001 cited in Guo, 2006), in which Chinese immigrant mothers adopted child-rearing practices that were similar to the Western practice of providing guided instructions—as opposed to the traditional practice of using directives to guide their children. The Chinese immigrant parents in those studies also offered their children choices regarding their education and learning, which is similar to the Western practices and goals of child rearing that emphasise individuality in children.

The Australian cross-cultural literature also indicated variations in the traditional parenting practices of non-Western immigrant families (Wise & da Silva, 2007). A comparative study of the parenting beliefs and practices of Anglo, Vietnamese and Somali parents documented changes in the discipline, beliefs and developmental expectations of the Somali and Vietnamese immigrant families, which were the result of acculturation. Similarly, Li’s (2001) study on the parenting practices of Chinese immigrants in Canada also revealed a correlation between parents’ traditional cultural expectations and their acculturative attitudes, minority status and other life experiences in a host country. Other studies involving Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrants to the USA also support the notion of cultural translation in parenting practices (Adair & Tobin, 2008). The immigrant parents in Adair and Tobin’s study (2008) wanted their children to learn English in early childhood contexts, even at the expense of losing their home language. The parents in that study argued that learning English was needed for children’s academic success and adjustments in English dominated schools.

The literature also highlighted the effects of global media on parenting practices in recent times. In the last decade, a change in the breastfeeding patterns of mothers was attributed to the infant feeding advertisements published in parents’ magazines (Foss & Southwell, 2006). Popular women’s magazines and the media have now become primary sources of parenting advice for many immigrant Indian families, including for those parents living in India (Goldbart & Mukherjee, 1999), as well as for many Western or other immigrant parents. Parents in India also seem to prefer Western models of child rearing and behavioural approaches to guidance and discipline, promoted through global media—similar to the Western parents (Goldbart & Mukherjee, 1999).

Immigrant parents need to grapple with issues of cultural globalisation and the dominance of Western traditions of parenting that are perpetuated via migration and other forces of globalisation (e.g. global media). In this context,
many non-Western parents will be confronted by ‘the choices between traditional values of authority, role and power in parenting, versus equality and communication with children in a globalised world’ (Luk-Fong, 2005, p. 130). As stated by Luk-Fong (2005, p. 130), while some parents adapt to parenting dilemmas by segregating their lives into two cultural settings and/or following their traditional cultural traditions, others cope by creating new hybrid forms of parenting. At the same time, a few parents will also be indecisive about their parenting, as they may not know how to negotiate cultural differences in parenting.

As pointed out by Roer-Stier and Rosenthal (2001), and Wahyuni (2005), cultural adaptations alter culturally-based parenting or child-rearing practices. Hybridity in parenting results from cultural adaptations of families. It appears to be promoted by the desire of immigrant parents to become bicultural and to integrate new cultures into their own cultural practices (Adams & Kirova, 2007). It can also be influenced by parents’ acculturative attitudes and practices, the length of residence in a host country, their relationships with the dominant culture, the presence of any specific needs, and the support systems available for parenting in the host country (Adams & Kirova, 2007; Jambunathan & Conselman, 2002; Patel, Power & Bhavnagri, 1996). For example, joint family systems provide a major support system for many Asian families when it comes to bringing up children (Roopnarine & Hossain, 1992). However, when Asian families migrate to new countries, they may not have such support systems available in their host country, so they then tend to rely more on global forces, such as media, for support on parenting issues. In brief, cultural adaptations of families are likely to promote hybridity in parenting practices in a modern world. As Gidden points out, ‘[T]he family is a site for the struggles between tradition and modernity, but also a metaphor for them’ (2001 cited in Luk-Fong, 2005, p. 18).

Hybridised parenting can be beneficial for both immigrant families and children, as it enables families to develop new insights into their parenting practices and assists them with their cultural adaptations (Kuran & Sandholm, 2003). However, it can also subject immigrant families to criticisms from people in their networks or extended family members for not adhering to their cultural traditions and expectations of parenting (Adair & Tobin, 2008). Additionally, it can also exacerbate parental concerns about their children losing their traditional culture and values, and their own power and influence over their children (Adair & Tobin, 2008; Baptise, 2005). Importantly, it can have ramifications for immigrant children’s development—whether it is with respect to learning a new language, or developing their identity and sense of self. The next section presents some discussion on the implications of hybridity in parenting for children’s development, as well as early childhood practices in multicultural societies such as Australia.

**Implications of hybridity in parenting for children’s development**

As argued by SACSA (2001), cultural integration has significant effects on people’s identity development. Global culture is intermixing with local cultures, leading to new local hybrid forms and personal identities (Kellner, 2000 cited in Suoranta, 2003). In a globalised world, non-Western immigrant children tend to experience diverse cultural upbringings. As pointed by Jones Diaz (2005), immigrant children tend to alter their use of language and cultural practices, as per the expectations at home or in early childhood settings; these shifts in language use or cultural practices lead to a hybrid identity. The identity development of these immigrant children will be bilingual or bicultural, as they tend to negotiate cultural differences even further in the context of their gender, race and class (Jones Diaz, 2005).

Immigrant children are also affected by the various social, cultural, personal and interpersonal dimensions and interactions of everyday life (Pile & Thrift, 1995). Additionally, their involvement as ‘cultural brokers’—resolving the cross-cultural dilemma of the home and host cultures—can also impact on their identity development (Adams & Kirova, 2007, p. 5).

Thus, the identity development of immigrant children is complex. It is affected by the distinct cultural systems of home and early childhood contexts (Adams & Kirova, 2007). While it is difficult to say whether a hybridised identity is useful for children growing up in a diverse society—hybridised parenting will have significant consequences for immigrant children’s identity development that is derived from their home culture (Jensen, 2003).

**Implications for early childhood practices**

The present discussion on the notion of hybridised parenting also suggests implications for early childhood educators working in settings that cater for immigrant families and their children. As globalisation tends to promote transnational transportation of people and increased migration to the West (Baptiste, 2005), it is imperative that educators acknowledge the multifaceted challenges that immigrant families face with respect to parenting in a host country. Educators also need to be aware that families’ cultural adaptations tend to promote hybridity in their parenting practices. Without knowledge on global forces and their impact on parenting, educators may be prejudiced and approach diverse families with stereotypical views on cultural practices of parenting in these new times (Adams & Kirova, 2007). Listening to the voices of immigrant families and children, and connecting with them at the time of their transnational and cultural transition, are vital for early childhood educators. Educators should also try to understand personal meanings and rationales for parenting.
practices or what Adams and Kirova (2007) refer to as ‘culture logic’. In this new era, it is essential that educators are knowledgeable about the global trends of parenting; develop new insights into parenting practices of immigrant families through collaboration; and that they assist families and children in their cultural transitions.

Conclusions

Today, many families are migrating to countries around the world to improve their living conditions and other life opportunities (Baptise, 1987 cited in Baptise, 2005). Previously, parenting was conceptualised in the local contexts of family, society and culture (Roer-Stier & Rosenthal, 2001). However, in these new times, parenting needs to be considered in the context of globalisation and its forces of migration, global media, Westernisation, consumerism and corporate materialism.

The discussion and evidence presented in this paper—although it supports the notion of cultural hybridisation of parenting—is very limited. Therefore, empirical research is needed to substantiate the cultural impacts of globalisation and hybridised parenting in immigrant families. To the best of the author’s knowledge, there is a paucity of research on parenting from the perspective of cultural globalisation. Some questions that could be addressed in the new research on immigrant parenting include:

a) How does cultural globalisation impact on immigrant families’ parenting?

b) Is cultural globalisation leading to hybridised parenting in immigrant families?

c) How do immigrant families use cultural shifts in parenting positively to advantage their children in a globalised society?

d) What do immigrant families see as the primary goals of parenting in a globalised world, where material wealth and economic progress are highly valued?

e) Above all, what are the impacts of hybridised parenting on families, children and educators in multicultural societies?

These questions are worth pursuing in future research on the notion of ‘hybridised parenting’ in immigrant families in a globalised world.

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References:


Character education, Dr Seuss and Te Whāriki: A likely combination

Miriam J. Singer
Fairleigh Dickinson University

Can we teach them wrong from right?
Can we help them see the light?
Using books I’m glad to say,
May teach the moral of the day.

We should teach them in the home,
We should teach them where they roam.
We can teach them in the school,
Where they’ll learn the golden rule.

Introduction

ONCE UPON A TIME, long before Dr Seuss, early childhood education came from the home. During the first few years of a child’s life, it was the parents, extended family, community and religious leaders who were responsible for teaching values—so that the child entered school with a solid moral background. While home values are still critical, it seems that increased responsibility is being placed upon the schools to instil in students appropriate values—collectively referred to as ‘character education’ (Ryan, 1993).

In New Zealand, Te Whāriki has consciously and judiciously designed the early childhood curriculum to address issues of character education, both overtly and covertly. Principles of holistic development, family and community, and relationships (Ministry of Education, 1996) are immediately brought to the forefront, along with the importance of building a child’s moral compass from infancy onwards. Moreover, Te Whāriki is specifically concerned with promoting and developing the values of the child in light of their cultural heritage:

To address bicultural issues, adults working in early childhood education should have an understanding of Māori views on child development, and on the role of the family, as well as understanding the views of other cultures in the community. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 41)

Values that are introduced in the home need to be respected, supported and reinforced in the school setting. Furthermore, since students come from different cultural backgrounds, the teacher needs to be familiar with the various cultures in his or her classroom, and facilitate mutual understanding and respect within the classroom community (Cowhey, 2006).

Dr Seuss has become a household name. His books are perennial favourites and are considered by many to be classics. Why is it that these books hold such power over young and old alike? Is it the outrageous characters that he created? The unconventional style of the art? Perhaps, it is the unique names of the characters, such as the ‘Lorax’, ‘Zax’ and the ‘Sneetches’, which have become part of our everyday vocabulary? Perhaps it is the rhyme and rhythm that holds the attention of readers and listeners. Whatever the case, there may be more than meets the eye (or ear).

This paper seeks to show an intimate connection between character education and Dr Seuss. Moreover, the author suggests that by using Dr Seuss’ stories in the early childhood classroom in an appropriate manner, a teacher can fulfil many of the goals of Te Whāriki. First, the author discusses character education in early childhood, including culturally mediated learning. Second, there is a discussion of Te Whāriki and its foundation for well-rounded child development. Third is a discussion of the use of literature as a vehicle for teaching and learning across content areas. Fourth, the author examines Dr Seuss and selected Seuss books, and gives suggestions for specific lessons. Finally, the article concludes with the connection between the selected Seuss books and the strands, goals and objectives of Te Whāriki, visualised in a table.
Character education in early childhood: ‘Train a child in his way’

There has been widespread controversy over what should and should not be included in character education in the classroom. Perhaps the most common term applied to character education is ‘values’. In 1993, Ryan wrote a paper entitled Mining the values in the curriculum. In it, he discusses both formal curriculum and hidden curriculum. Lickona also traces the history of character education, stating that ‘the Bible was the public school’s sourcebook for both moral and religious instruction’ (1993, p. 6). He discusses the decline of the family, trends in youth character, and the need to recover and support values which ‘affirm our human dignity’ (p. 9). Noddings (1995) addresses core values as ‘themes of caring’. Nord (1999) takes issue that religion has almost entirely been eliminated from the public school curriculum, often relegated to distant history. He posits that such a paradigm shift has contributed to the decline of educational opportunity and rigour, particularly at the high school level.

From the teaching perspective, Strike and Soltis (1998) suggest classifying ethics as consequentialist and non-consequentialist. Citing Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, they define consequentialism as doing the greatest good for the greatest number. Non-consequentialism is more in line with Kant’s theories—seeking equal respect over maximum benefit. Whichever way a teacher chooses to run the classroom, each of these theorists has their roots solidly based in their respective religious or moral beliefs. It is widely held that character education has its roots in religion, and therefore we must exercise caution not to ‘preach’ from any specific religious set of values, but rather to seek common ground that is held by all. Miller and Pedro (2006) suggest:

In the world in which children find themselves today, understanding and appreciating those with whom you attend school, learn and play makes for a much richer living and learning experience, expands horizons, and breaks down traditional barriers. (p. 293)

Kristjánsson (2002) refers to Western hegemony in his discussion of non-expansive character education. He builds a model that addresses values to be taught, as well as their emphasis in teaching. This model looks at religious-based education, values clarification, non-expansive character education and moral reasoning for children. À propos to Kristjánsson’s concern is the realisation that Māori culture is far from the prevailing Western religions. Māori concepts of ritual purity and forbidden access are foreign to the hegemonic paradigm.

To provide a modicum of balance, it is only fair to discuss Alfie Kohn’s concerns about the way in which character education is delivered. Kohn (1997) suggests that schools are, in fact, teaching particular values, and that many programs have specific agendas. Since many schools offer rewards for the students who work harder, help others or exhibit the desired character traits of the week, students often work towards the rewards, rather than the altruistic values that we hope they will incorporate into their personalities (Kohn, 1997). Kohn’s position is valid and once again points out the necessity to examine what is being taught and how it is being delivered.

While each of these theorists adds value to the discussion of what specific values should be taught to our children, it is not the intent of this paper to debate which theorist has the most validity. A bicultural curriculum, by definition, needs to embrace both (or multiple) value systems. In the case of Te Whāriki, predominant white, Christian values are taught alongside those of the Māori people. Similarities and differences need to be addressed. The author has chosen to investigate the use of identifiable literature (in this case, exclusively from Dr Seuss) that addresses academic content, and more specifically social content, as a vehicle that supports this bicultural curriculum.

What’s in a program?

In the United States, there exists a ‘hidden curriculum’, which de facto, creates a cultural divide. Giroux and Penna (1983) discuss the hidden curriculum in terms of the norms, values and beliefs that are conveyed through both explicit and implicit instruction. These values are acquired through formal classroom interaction, as well as informal social interactions. Values instruction in the US has taken on a new face, and is currently referred to as ‘character education’.

One of the most frequently used character education programs in the US is ‘Character Counts’. This program has a foundation of six pillars, which include: Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, and Citizenship. Character Counts refers to these pillars as ‘core ethical values’ (Character Counts, 2007). McBrien and Brandt (1997) list honesty, kindness, generosity, courage, freedom, equality and respect as basic human values.

Other packaged programs in character education hold similar core values appropriate for moral development. For example, ‘Open Circle’, a program out of Wellesley Center for Women (Wellesley College), is a holistic program that sets adults as role models for children. The program extends not only to teachers and students, but to caregivers and administrators as well. Their mission is to work with school communities to help children become ethical people, contributing citizens and successful learners. Open Circle fosters development of relationships that support safe, caring and respectful learning communities of children and adults’ (Open Circle, 2008).
‘WiseSkills’ is another commercially available character education program. It has three components: school component, family component and community component. Specifically, the elementary (primary) school component is based around monthly themes, such as positive attitude, respect, responsibility, self-discipline, relationships, personal goals, citizenship and conflict resolution (WiseSkills, n.d.). While many of the character education programs are research based, many are also proprietary in nature. Exactly who stands behind the purveyors of these programs is not entirely clear. Caveat emptor (let the buyer beware).

Whether a school selects a pre-packaged character education program or designs its own, whether there is a school-wide program or each teacher is individually responsible for developing classroom programs in values education, it has become generally accepted in the educational world that schools and teachers have assumed a major role in developing their students’ moral compasses. Schools have both a formal curriculum and a hidden one (Ryan, 1993). The hidden curriculum includes socialisation messages, which Brint, Contreras and Matthews (2001) divide into four areas. They suggest that there are:

(1) Values connected to work performance (orderliness and industriousness), (2) values connected to interaction between self and others (respect for others, participation, cooperation, self-control and self-direction), (3) ‘traditional virtues’ (honesty, fairness, considerateness, responsibility, reliability and courage), and (4) modern values (appreciation of cultural diversity, appreciation of one’s own culture, appreciation of individual uniqueness and special talents, and appreciation of choice and variety as values). (p. 159)

Their study notes that while teachers post written rules in the classroom that govern appropriate behaviour, many of the actions within the classroom suggest routine practices which support future career development and life skills—such as the use of token economies, collaborative learning and activity centres, which supports children’s ‘capacity to move easily between many fast-changing activities’ (p. 167).

If such activities are intended to promote school-to-work fluidity, do they undermine other values that may be a part of the child’s cultural capital? In no way should this be misconstrued as a disconnection from home values. In fact, as is stated in Te Whāriki, ‘learning begins at home, and early childhood programs outside the child’s own home play a significant role in extending early learning and in laying the foundations for successful future learning’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). Schools must be cautious in their development and implementation of values education, to address not only the hegemonic values, but also those of the diverse minorities within the school. In the case of New Zealand primary (and secondary) schools, this means a sensitivity to and integration of Māori customs, understandings and values.

**Te Whāriki and character education**

The goals of *Te Whāriki*, developed in 1996 by the Ministry of Education, New Zealand, are by design intended to be inclusive. This curriculum takes into account both English and Māori cultures and culturally mediated learning, while being mindful of the heritages of all partners in the educational process. ‘The Māori curriculum is an integral part of the document and provides a basis for bicultural early childhood education in New Zealand’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10). *Te Whāriki* intends to lay out the issues and curricula that should be addressed in early childhood, and to help develop a well-rounded, healthy child while still taking into account the multicultural nature of the overall student population. Outcomes are specified and experiences are suggested to help meet these outcomes.

One specific cultural connection that makes Dr Seuss’ books a perfect vehicle in primary schools is the use of storytelling. Māori culture has a rich oral history component. While Dr Seuss is clearly not an oral culture, the concept of passing along important messages, such as etiquette, through the use of a story addresses a similar objective. Furthermore, as one looks at both *Te Whāriki* and Dr Seuss (particularly *The Lorax*), there is a clear reverence for ‘mana’ (spiritual essence), which resides in man, nature and even—according to Māori tradition—man-made items.

To begin, Strand 1: Wellbeing, has three goals. Both Goals 2 and 3 suggest a foundation in character or values education. Goal 2 states: ‘Children experience an environment where their emotional wellbeing is nurtured’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 50). Goal 3 states: ‘Children experience an environment where they are kept safe from harm’ (p. 52).

In addition, *Te Whāriki* has other pointers to the general areas of character education. Within Strand 2: Belonging, both Goal 3, ‘Children and their families experience an environment where they feel comfortable with the routines, customs and regular events’ (p. 60), and Goal 4, ‘Children and their families experience an environment where they know the limits and boundaries of acceptable behaviour’ (p. 62), seem to be clearly directed towards areas of character development.

Nearly 3000 years ago, King Solomon suggested in Proverbs 22:6: ‘Train a child according to his way, even when he is old he will not depart from it’ (Gottlieb Zomberg, 1982). What is a child’s way? When considering this, one can look to Vygotsky’s (1962) zone of proximal development. Vygotsky discussed the idea
that children can develop higher levels of cognition with adult help and guidance, when compared to on their own. Specific to Te Whāriki is the concept that children develop their cultural tools through interactions with parents and teachers. Howard Gardner (1983), in his multiple intelligences theory, addresses the ways that individuals learn, other than linguistically and mathematically. For this paper, Gardner’s suggestion of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences are the most relevant. However, most importantly, one can look at the cultural capital that each child brings from his or her home into the school setting. This capital provides a wealth of resources for the student. Each child brings his or her own understanding of class, gender, family roles, values, aesthetics and more (Bourdieu, 1984). Such a personal lens inevitably shapes the student, and his or her learning. As Te Whāriki so appropriately states:

There are many migrants in New Zealand, and, as in any country with a multicultural heritage, there is a diversity of beliefs about child-rearing practices, kinship roles, obligations, codes of behaviour, and what kinds of knowledge are valuable. The early childhood curriculum supports the cultural identity of all children, affirms and celebrates cultural differences, and aims to help children gain a positive awareness of their own and other cultures. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 18)

The concept of culturally mediated learning can be applied in other countries where there is a culturally diverse student body. Today, our world seems to be shrinking—the physical movement and relocation of people is growing, and is coupled with the technology-assisted ties that we form. Teachers must be mindful to respect the diversity in their classrooms, and to encourage their students to do the same. Additionally, they must be careful not to push aside heritage in favour of societal progression. One way to aid the understanding of diversity and global issues is through literature.

In 1928, Piaget suggested the term ‘schema’, to describe the development of abstract mental structures. Anderson (1977) more fully developed the concept of schema theory to explain how children use their experiences and background to decipher cognitive dissonance as new experiences and learning come along. He posits that there is an integral network of schemata and sub-schemata, which children use to assimilate new information, particularly when it is cross-cultural. The schemata that children develop begin in their home environment, with the daily routines of the family. A simple example would be the use of the terms ‘please’ and ‘thank you’. A child raised in such an environment might find it strange to meet other children who don’t use these words. Similarly, children raised in an environment where physical boundaries are set, such as at a marae, encounter cultural conflict when they are permitted to enter a building without specific permission or formal welcoming activities. The cognitive dissonance that a child experiences in school helps them to develop new schemata to produce what we term ‘learning’. This paper addresses links between the students’ cultural backgrounds, the literature used in the classroom, and the goals of Te Whāriki. The ideas proposed below seek to take advantage of the rich Māori culture of oral storytelling. The ideas provided mesh Vygotsky’s (1978) symbolic tools and Feuerstein’s (1990) mediated learning experience (MLE) as ‘sociocultural forces in shaping the situations of a child’s development and learning’ (Kozulin, 2002, p. 8) with the hegemonic values and the indigenous culture.

Using literature as a vehicle

Literature may be used at all ages to support concepts and content. One is certainly aware of literature being used with older students to address a variety of content areas. For example, To kill a mockingbird (Lee, 1960) addresses areas of prejudice, women’s status and hypocrisy. The scarlet letter (Hawthorne, 1850) and Tess of the D’Urbervilles (Hardy, 1891) relate issues of fidelity and illegitimacy. 1984 (Orwell, 1949) looks at political concerns. While secondary schools have used cross-content literature for years, primary schools have only recently come to use cross-content literacy to teach concepts other than reading skills. As a result, a whole new library of children’s literature has sprung up. Recently, children’s books have looked at a variety of issues faced by preschool, early childhood and primary school students. The Berenstain Bears series (by authors Stan and Jan Berenstain)7 addresses the issues of going to the doctor and the dentist, fear of the dark, and nail biting. Books such as Brian’s bird (Davis, 2000), Dancing wheels (McMahon, 2000) and A.D.D. Not B.A.D. (Penn, 2003) have put the issues of special needs students into literary form. Literacy instruction has become a forum for bibliotherapy—a vehicle for helping students to work through a variety of situations through stories that mimic or depict real-life situations.

Iaquinta and Hipsky state that bibliotherapy uses ‘children’s literature to explore children’s feelings about self-esteem’ (2006, p. 209) by allowing the student to identify with a character in the book. Bibliotherapy may help students to understand a disability, address issues of self-esteem, and problem-solve (Amer, 1999; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1994). Through using literature, students may improve their understanding of complex social issues (Goodwin & Jenkins, 1997). This is where Vygotsky’s theory of guiding children in their understanding of new concepts plays a major role in helping children to navigate the morass of social mores.

7 Stan & Jan Berestain have written 250 children’s books in the Berestain Bears series between 1962 and 2010. Most of these have character education messages and are published by Random House. Most recently, several of their books have religious messages and are published by Zonderkidz.
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas, has put together the Bibliotherapy Education Project. In addition to using books for those with clinical problems, the project’s homepage states that ‘developmental bibliotherapy may be used by teachers, librarians or lay helpers to facilitate normal development and self-actualisation with an essentially healthy population’ (Bibliotherapy Education Project, 2007). Among the benefits of bibliotherapy are:

- increased empathetic understanding of others (cultures, lifestyles and lived experiences)
- enhanced insight and integration
- promoted coping skills
- provided information and alternatives
- stimulated discussion of feelings and ideas
- increased enjoyment of literature and reading

The author asserts that using Dr Seuss’ books in a guided reading setting can play a critical role in the childhood character education. Dr Seuss, née Theodor Geisel, wrote 44 children’s books. Many of Seuss’ early drawings were political cartoons aimed at Mussolini, Hitler and Lindbergh. He… devoted much of his considerable talent and influence to advocating political and social change. From condemning isolationism and attacking anti-Semitism, to his later works for literacy, the environment and against the arms race, Dr Seuss’ most popular works reflect his passion for fairness, democracy and tolerance. (Independent Television Service, 2008)

Random House Publishers contracted a new reader from Geisel and under the contract he was limited to 225 new words. The cat in the hat was born. After a bet with fellow author Bennett Cerf to write a book with only 50 words, Green eggs and ham (1960) made its appearance (Seuss Enterprises, 2002). However, Dr Seuss never lost his desire to advocate for ‘social change, teaching generations of children not only how to be better readers, but better people as well’ (Independent Television Service, 2008). It is this exact attribute that makes Seuss’ work so valuable in early childhood character education.

**Fitting it together**

Engaging students in their learning is always a challenge. What is interesting for boys may not attract girls; what appeals to the more mature, critical-thinking students may stymie those who process in a more rigid manner. In many countries, particularly the United States, students with a variety of special needs are in regular education classrooms. Some of the special needs include learning disabilities, physical disabilities, emotional and behaviour disorders, and language deficiencies (those who speak a language at home that is different to the primary language of instruction). This wide variety of ‘inclusion’ students in regular classrooms may leave teachers hard-pressed to provide sufficiently differentiated lessons that reach all students.

Good teachers know that when the instructional level material being taught is relevant to the students, and within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962), students find a relationship to the material which they are more likely to internalise. Furthermore, teachers also know that a constructivist approach (Bruner, 1966; Thirteen ed online, 2004) will allow the students to make the connection for themselves, which further solidifies the concepts. Based on the research of Piaget (Huitt & Hummel, 2003), children develop schema during their cognitive development. With each new experience, already existing schema are referenced and built upon. When cognitive dissonance occurs, so does learning. This is how our students begin to develop better understanding of the foundations inherent in real-world learning (Bruner, 1966; Festinger, 1957).

Herein lies the premise for using Dr Seuss’ literature to present complex concepts. Many students are already familiar with Dr Seuss. His books fall into the students’ zone(s) of proximal development. The rhyming schemes sound familiar. The colours are cheerful. The plots grab the students’ attention. His characters seem familiar and inviting, even in books that the students have not previously read or heard. This author has read some of the less familiar books to classes of graduate students. Amazingly, they were held spellbound, waiting to a) hear the story, and b) figure out why a professor was reading Dr Seuss to them. Certainly, there are some of Dr Seuss’ books that are more appropriate for the younger student, and there are many that can be used even at the high-school level. Each country, and many publishers, have their own rating systems for grade level identification. The ‘upper-level’ books are not discussed in this paper.

The lessons to be learned or extracted from Seuss’ books are varied, and can be used by ‘children of all ages’. While the lessons presented in this paper are geared towards early childhood, and more specifically towards character education, with a little tweaking they are equally suitable for the upper-primary...
grades, as well as for high school. The suggestions made are deliberately left open-ended. Key to using these stories as a foundation for character education is the development of questions that elicit higher-order thinking on the part of the students. Questions should be quite open-ended, to allow for discussion between students. Teachers can (and should) take their leads from their own students, and the situations in which the lessons are being used. The stories below are discussed in terms of general values education and some relationship to either Te Whariki or Māori culture. For easy reference, Table 1 shows suggested correlations for each story presented to the Strands, Goals and Objectives of Te Whariki.

The cat in the hat

The cat in the hat (Seuss, 1957) is arguably Dr Seuss’ most famous book. The story describes two children sitting alone in their house on a rainy day wondering what to do—when who should appear, but the cat in the hat. This cat is full of mischief and invites the children to have a world of fun. The children struggle with the potential of new freedom: ‘Then Sally and I did not know what to say. Our mother was out of the house for the day’ (Seuss, 1957, p. 8). The fish in the story plays the part of their conscience, and repeatedly states, ‘He should not be about. He should not be here when your mother is out!’ (p. 11). For the Māori child, the comparison between the cat’s forced entrance into the house and entering a wharenui with powhiri and mihimihi can lead to a discussion on cultural differences.

Readers of this story know that things get out of hand, until the narrator (the boy) commands the cat: ‘Now you do as I say. You pack up those things and you take them away!’ (p. 52). The teacher may note that these appear to be young children who know what is right and wrong, and who know when things are getting out of hand. When reading the story, the teacher might ask the class to suggest reasons for why the boy orders the cat in the hat to leave. This is an opportunity to guide a class discussion on recognising what is acceptable behaviour and what is not.

Besides knowing right from wrong, the book ends with the opportunity for the characters to discuss the truth with their parents. Mother returns home, and asks the children how their day went. ‘And Sally and I did not know what to say. Should we tell her the things that went on there that day?’ (p. 60). Here again is a golden opportunity for discussion. When do we tell parents about inappropriate behaviour? What do we tell them? ‘Should we tell her about it? Now, what should we do? Well … what would you do if your mother asked you?’ (p. 61). The children in the classroom will have different answers. They may change their answers as they get older, but however they respond, the teacher has the opportunity to discuss the choices that we make in our lives, and the reasons for our choices. Here is an opening to help children develop their decision-making processes.

Green eggs and ham

It is not hard to see how this book, also a perennial favourite, can be used to help children address risk-taking and stubborn streaks. Sam-I-am insists that the unnamed character try his green eggs and ham. Our protagonist staunchly declares, ‘I do not like them, Sam-I-am. I do not like green eggs and ham’ (Seuss, 1960, p. 12). Yet, as with many children, he has not even tried what the author’s mother refers to as a ‘thank-you portion’. Sam-I-am presents many scenarios for trying the new food, yet the refusals continue.

The dialogue continues, until Sam-I-am finally suggests, ‘You do not like them. So you say. Try them! Try them! And you may’ (Seuss, 1960, p. 53). Negotiations follow, and our headstrong character agrees to try the green eggs and ham if Sam-I-am will just leave him alone. However, what follows is: ‘Say! I like green eggs and ham! ...Thank you! Thank you, Sam-I-am!’ (p. 59, 62).

The wonderful lessons that can follow may certainly deal with trying new things (not necessarily food), taking reasonable risks, and addressing issues of being headstrong for no apparent reason. The connection to a bicultural curriculum seems obvious. Each of the cultures, both Māori and Pakeha, learn about each other’s foods, customs and values.

The Zax

The Zax is a delightful short story in the collection The Sneetches and other stories (Geisel, 1961). In it, we find two typical Seuss characters of unknown gender or species. One is a north-going Zax, and the other a south-going Zax. Each has been trained to go in only one direction, and never veers off his track. In class, the teacher could equate this to two students with different cultures or backgrounds. When the Zax meet, they are stuck. Neither will compromise his standards and neither will stray from his set directional path. ‘Never budge! That’s my rule. Never budge in the least! Not an inch to the west! Not an inch to the east!’ (Geisel, 1961, p. 32). An impasse results. However, what the educator will find is a wonderful story for introducing the concept and art of compromise, and for teaching the skills of conflict resolution.

Gertrude McFuzz

Gertrude McFuzz (Geisel, 1950) is one of the stories that can be taken in many directions. In it we find the story of a young bird with only one tail feather, who is jealous of another bird that has two tail feathers. She implores her uncle, the doctor, to find a pill that will add feathers to her tail. Naturally, if one pill adds a single
feather, then two must add two, and so forth.

For a class setting, graduate students have suggested that this story be used to discuss drugs and drug overdoses, self-esteem, jealousy, concern with personal appearance, trying to keep up with others and emotional needs. Conversations can become quite lively when students are given the floor. Most important is the fact that this story provides a launch pad for the critical discussion of many sensitive issues.

One suggestion is to read part of the story and then ask students to predict what might happen next. Reading the next few pages will either confirm or reject their predictions. Stopping again, students might again predict how the story will end. It is the end message that is critical.

And, finally, when all of the pulling was done, Gertrude, behind her, again had just one ... That one little feather she had as a starter. But now that’s enough, because now she is smarter. (Geisel, 1950, p. 42)

The teacher can always refer back to this last page of the story if the students are having difficulty making the appropriate connections.

For children in a bicultural school, there is a special message. Each child has unique characteristics, none of which are superior or inferior—just different. The ability to compare and accept each other for who they are is a critical step in what Nieto (1998) refers to as affirmation, solidarity and critique.

What was I scared of?

What was I scared of? is one of Dr Seuss’ lesser-known stories. It appears in The Sneetches and other stories. In it, a young boy walks alone at night in the woods. He claims that he is not scared of anything, when he “spied them. I saw a pair of pale green pants with nobody inside them!” (Geisel, 1961, p. 44). He remains unaffected until the pants move, at which time he turns heel and runs. A week later, he has another late-night meeting with the pants; and yet another the following night. Now, he is scared. But scared of what? After all, the pants are empty. There is an unknown element here.

How many children do we know that are afraid of the unknown? Adults too, for that matter. The boy describes his natural reaction: ‘I yelled for help. I screamed. I shrieked. I howled. I yowled, I cried, “Oh, save me from these pale green pants with nobody inside!”’ (p. 59).

Here lies the real lesson for the students. ‘But then a strange thing happened. Why, those pants began to cry! Those pants began to tremble. They were just as scared as I!’ (p. 60). By drawing upon Feuerstein’s mediated learning experience (MLE), the teacher has the opportunity to select and interpret stimuli (the story) for the students (Feuerstein, 1990). What a wonderful way to teach students that perhaps someone new or diverse in the classroom is just as frightened as we might be. When given a chance to introduce themselves to each other, they might well become good friends— as happens at the end of What was I scared of?

The big brag

Yet another of Seuss’ lesser-known works is The big brag, which can be found in Yertle the turtle and other stories (Geisel, 1950). This is an ideal story for teaching children about boasting and exaggerating the truth. It is also a story where children can explore the concepts that everyone has something that they do well but that does not make them better than anyone else; that everyone has something that they can’t do as well as others, but that does not make them less or worse than anyone else; and that each person is important and special. We are who we are. In the story, it takes a lowly worm to teach these lessons to a rabbit and a bear.

The Sneetches

The Sneetches (Geisel, 1961) is a story that clearly addresses issues of multiculturalism. There are Star-Belly Sneetches and Plain-Belly Sneetches. Themes of prejudice and discrimination are blatant:

But, because they had stars, all the Star-Belly Sneetches would brag, ‘We’re the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches.’ (Geisel, 1961, p. 4)

The Plain-Belly Sneetches are left out of social activities and kept away. However, a character named Sylvester McMonkey McBean arranges to fix them up—to give them stars on their bellies. Of course, once this happens, the Star-Belly Sneetches must have their stars removed to retain their exclusivity. McBean becomes rich and the Sneetches learn several lessons.

This paper addresses early childhood, but it is interesting to note that Dr Seuss (Geisel) chose stars as a symbol of separation. For older students, the Sneetches may easily be used to show how stars were used during the Holocaust as a symbol of separation. It is no accident that the Sneetches are yellow and the stars are green. This specific distinction may need to be pointed out, since stars are also used in a positive way on many flags, and even on students’ papers to identify excellent work products.

For early childhood, the story of the Sneetches is easily adaptable to a variety of ethnicities and cultures. It provides an opportunity to discuss not only how groups

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2 Pages in Yertle the turtle and other stories and The Lorax are unnumbered.
differ, but more importantly, how they are the same. Whereas the history of colonisation of the Māori, along with the closing of indigenous schools, marginalised the Māori students with what is frequently referred to as ‘cultural deficit’, the bicultural curriculum of Te Whariki seeks to address, among many issues, the problems of underachievement. Using stories like The Sneetches allows all students to learn the lessons of acceptance and friendship. Students can be asked to question why the Sneetches discriminated against others based on looks or markings. They may be guided to explore how they view themselves and others. They may also be guided to question how they make decisions based solely on looks (selecting a book, food or toy). The Sneetches opens the door for discussion and exploration.

The Lorax

In 1969, John McConnell introduced the idea of an Earth Day at the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) conference on the environment. The idea took hold, and in 1971 United Nations (UN) Secretary-General U Thant proclaimed:

May there only be peaceful and cheerful Earth Days to come for our beautiful Spaceship Earth as it continues to spin and circle in frigid space with its warm and fragile cargo of animate life. (United Nations Cyberschoolbus, 2004)

As many took up the cry and challenge to guard the Earth, Seuss, already a political cartoonist, joined the movement to save the environment. His Lorax has become a symbol of those who ‘speak for the trees’ (Geisel, 1971, p. 23) and other endangered species, as well as for all environmental issues. The pictures show the sharp contrast between the beauty of what was and what could still be, and what our environment is likely to become if we continue to be wasteful, excessive and abusive towards it. Even the name given to the Once-lor is suggestive of the inherent dangers which face our environment.

For both the Māori students and the Pakeha, this story opens a door for discussion on the Māori oral history of Ranginui, the Sky Father, and Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother. Comparisons of stories, legends and respect for the environment may ensue.

Lessons stemming directly from The Lorax will certainly depend upon the students’ ages. Children as young as four may be willing to sit for the story itself. They appreciate it for the pictures and the sounds of the words. Children this young can be taught to turn off lights in empty rooms, turn off running taps in the kitchen and bathrooms, and recycle paper, bottles and cans. While they may not fully understand the implications of recycling, they can become habituated to the process so that when they are of the appropriate age, they will be able to see how their actions speak as loudly as their words.

As the children grow and mature, teachers can add the appropriate lessons for why and how. Students in the early grades can understand that trash cans fill up easily. They can extend this real-life experience to overflowing landfills and other appropriate environmental issues. Teachers can explain how certain materials are recycled. By Year 3, students can read cartoons to become aware of post-consumer recycled-fibre content. They can learn how metal is smelted and reused, as is the same with glass products. In the US, recycled plastic bags and bottles are being used to make park benches, and to provide the foundation for new roadbeds under the asphalt.

Most importantly, The Lorax is a conscience-raising book. It causes students to think. It allows them to construct their own meaning of environmental issues. While there is clearly an environmental agenda in this book, teachers should link social responsibility to the science lessons. Students can explore the concept of an ecosystem—which directly supports the Te Whariki Strand 5: Exploration.

For easy reference, each of the stories discussed above is correlated to one or more Strands of Te Whariki. Suggestions for the appropriate correlations to the Goals and Objectives are also shown in Table 1. Teachers may find that other goals and objectives also apply.

Conclusions

The Ministry of Education has laid a solid base for early childhood education. The Strands, Goals and Objectives of Te Whariki are clearly stated and take into account the multicultural nature of New Zealand. Teachers and administrators in schools should take it upon themselves to become intimate with these Goals and Objectives as they plan their curricula.

Development of the students’ moral principles and values is an integral part of early childhood education. While there are certainly many formats for delivering a solid curriculum on character education, the area of literacy presents an endless variety of resources. Specifically, the use of Dr Seuss’ stories draws a close relationship between Te Whariki and character education. Teachers of early childhood should seriously consider using Dr Seuss’ books as a foundation for open classroom discussion of critical concepts relating to areas of self-esteem, multiculturalism, environmental issues, personal conduct, building friendships and conflict resolution.

With Seuss on the loose, I know I can find
A story with meaning and morals behind.
Table 1: Correlation of stories to Strands, Goals and Objectives of *Te Whāriki*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Strand of <em>Te Whāriki</em></th>
<th>Goal within the Strand</th>
<th>Objective within the Goal (Bullets)</th>
<th>Page found in <em>Te Whāriki</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The cat in the hat</td>
<td>1: Wellbeing</td>
<td>3: Children experience an environment where they are kept safe from harm.</td>
<td>3, 5, 7</td>
<td>52</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2: Belonging</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4: Children and their families experience an environment where they know the limits and boundaries of acceptable behaviour.</td>
<td>4, 5</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green eggs and ham</td>
<td>1: Wellbeing</td>
<td>1. Children experience an environment where their health is promoted.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3: Children experience an environment where they are kept safe from harm</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>52</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2: Belonging</td>
<td>3: Children and their families experience an environment where they feel comfortable with the routines, customs and regular events.</td>
<td>4, 5</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4: Communication</td>
<td>2: Children experience an environment where they develop verbal communication skills for a range of purposes.</td>
<td>2, 3, 7, 8</td>
<td>76</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4: Children experience an environment where they discover and develop different ways to be creative and expressive.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5: Exploration</td>
<td>3: Children experience an environment where they learn strategies for active exploration, thinking and reasoning.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Zax</td>
<td>3: Contribution</td>
<td>1: Children experience an environment where there are equitable opportunities for learning, irrespective of gender, ability, age, ethnicity or background.</td>
<td>1, 3, 4, 8</td>
<td>66</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3: Children experience an environment where they are encouraged to learn with and alongside others.</td>
<td>1, 2, 4</td>
<td>70</td>
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<td>4: Communication</td>
<td>2: Children experience an environment where they develop verbal communication skills for a range of purposes.</td>
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<td>Gertrude McFuzz</td>
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<td>1. Children experience an environment where their health is promoted.</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2: Children experience an environment where their emotional wellbeing is nurtured.</td>
<td>4, 6</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>3: Children experience an environment where they are kept safe from harm</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3: Contribution</td>
<td>2: Children experience an environment where they are affirmed as individuals.</td>
<td>1, 2, 5</td>
<td>68</td>
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<td>3: Children experience an environment where they are encouraged to learn with and alongside others.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5: Exploration</td>
<td>2: Children experience an environment where they gain confidence in and control of their bodies.</td>
<td>1, 3</td>
<td>86</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4: Children experience an environment where they develop working theories for making sense of the natural, social, physical and material worlds.</td>
<td>7, 8, 9, 10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>Strand of Te Whariki</td>
<td>Goal within the Strand</td>
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<td>The Sneetches</td>
<td>2: Belonging</td>
<td>1: Children and their families experience an environment where connecting links with the family and the wider world are affirmed and extended.</td>
<td>1, 3</td>
<td>56</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2: Children and their families experience an environment where they know that they have a place.</td>
<td>3, 4, 5</td>
<td>58</td>
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<td>3: Children and their families experience an environment where they feel comfortable with the routines, customs and regular events.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4: Communication</td>
<td>3: Children experience an environment where they experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures.</td>
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<td>78</td>
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References


Examining parental and staff perceptions of childcare service quality across competing business structures

Scott Weaven
Debra Grace
Griffith University

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES PARENTAL and childcare staff perceptions of quality across alternative childcare governance structures in Australia. A total of 21 childcare staff currently working within both ‘non-profit’ and ‘for-profit’ long day care centres were interviewed. In addition, 20 interviews with parents of children attending community-based, independent-private and corporate chain centres were conducted. Significant differences between the quality perceptions of parent and staff cohorts were found. In addition, inter-group differences were also observed. The results tentatively suggest that both parents and staff attach importance to both structural (regulated and flexible) and procedural elements of childcare service delivery—although parental age and caregiver experience appear to moderate the levels of importance assigned to identified quality dimensions.

Introduction

Both non-profit and for-profit centres provide long day care services in Australia. These include community-based providers (non-profit), independent private operators (for-profit) and corporate chains (publicly listed for-profit entities). Each structure has markedly different strategic and operational approaches, which has led researchers to question the relative merits of each organisational arrangement, in terms of the service quality provided. For-profit organisations are said to follow a ‘business orientation’, focusing on cost and efficiency, while the ‘humanistic orientation’ of non-profit centres is said to be more effective in developing beneficial attachment relationships with children through accommodating individual needs (Goodfellow, 2005). Of particular concern is the recent trend towards the corporatisation of services, which has been viewed by critics as resulting in poorly managed businesses, reductions in the quality of staff and significant decreases in the overall quality of services provided (Nyland, 2001). Proponents suggest that privatised operations result in cheaper and more efficient service provision, the injection of new resources, and subsequent financial relief on the public system (Kruger, 2009). However, the recent demise of the largest publicly-listed owner of childcare entities, ABC Learning, has renewed concerns regarding falling quality standards in corporate long day care centres. Given these concerns, it is surprising that the relationship between childcare service quality and governance structure has only received limited attention in the literature. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, only one other study has considered this issue—albeit only from a single stakeholder’s (childcare worker) perspective (Rush, 2006). To this end, this research extends current understanding of service delivery in childcare through examining quality perceptions (of both parents and childcare staff), within the context of alternative childcare management and ownership structures.

Literature review

Service quality

Service quality in childcare remains a subjective construct (Ceglowshi & Bacigalupa, 2002). From a parental perspective, service quality is usually defined in relation to the needs of the child and family, with the most important aspects relating to the childcare service outcomes (including affordability aspects) and physical childcare settings (Emlen et al., 1999). Although quality assessments are often influenced by the demographic characteristics of the parents (including age, cultural
norms, reference groups and socioeconomic background) (Noble, 2007), prior research has shown that, overall, parents consistently rate the emotional warmth (nurturing), health and safety dimensions of care above all else (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997).

From a researcher’s perspective, there appears to be three contextual factors that assist in the promotion of high-quality care: regulation, funding and auspice. Firstly, regulations have been found to be related to quality, with better regulations equating to better staff–child ratios, lower rates of infectious illness, better-trained staff, appropriate child interactions and lower staff turnover (Phillips et al., 1995). Similarly, funding has also been found to relate to staff ratios, staff morale and turnover, levels of staff training, working conditions, and staff–child interactions (Scarr et al., 1994). Finally, in a Canadian study, auspice (ownership structure) was found to impact upon the quality of childcare services, with non-profit centres exhibiting better staff–child ratios, better employment conditions, lower staff absences, reduced turnover and lower work-related stress (Doherty-Derkowsk, 1995). However, the role of corporate structure and childcare service quality has received scant attention in the early childhood literature, despite continued debate regarding the relative merits of corporate childcare privatisation and corporatisation (Rush, 2006).

**Corporate structure**

Market driven childcare provision in Australia continues to inspire much debate. Proponents of the ‘economic rationalist’ approach to service provision view privatisation and corporatisation of public services as a valuable innovation (Love et al., 2000) resulting in the injection of new resources, cheaper and more efficient services, and needed financial relief on the public system. In support of this, the recent privatisation of Australian prison systems has resulted in significant construction and operational savings (Love et al., 2000). Furthermore, there is some evidence that the entrance of commercial operations often encourages greater performance in public-sector enterprises, through mutual benchmarking activities (Pataki et al., 1998). However, critics suggest that privately-owned (and, in particular, publicly-listed) childcare services encourage poorly managed businesses, due to their focus on appeasing shareholder demands (Nyland, 2001). In addition, concerns have been raised regarding the capacity of corporate chains to exert influence over smaller competitors, manipulate accreditation outcomes and influence the direction of public policy (Rush, 2006; Sumsion, 2006a).

In a recent study, childcare staff appraised quality outcomes associated with for-profit and non-profit long day care centres (Rush, 2006). The findings suggest that community centres offer the highest levels of care and that independent private operations significantly outperform corporate chains when considering the quality of physical equipment, food and nutrition, staff–child ratios, and the provision of environments conducive to the development of children (Rush, 2006). However, parental perceptions of quality within the context of alternative operating structures have not been investigated—which is curious, given that the results of prior studies of parental perceptions have been shown to both reinforce and extend current conceptualisations of childcare service quality (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; da Silva & Wise, 2006). To this end, this research will extend the current early childhood development literature through investigating the following research questions:

RQ1. To what extent are there differences in the perception of consumers (parents) and providers (staff) regarding service quality across different operating structures?

RQ2. To what extent are there differences in the perception of consumers (parents) and providers (staff) in relation to quality in childcare service delivery?

**Method**

**Research design**

Given the nature of the research problem, a realism research design was adopted to facilitate understanding, capture the complexities of this subject area and triangulate multiple perceptions about the nature and form of reality—so as to arrive at analytically generalisable results (Yin, 2003). In this research, sample selection was purposive (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001), and parents and childcare staff within regional and urban areas of south-east Queensland were interviewed to limit extraneous variation in collected data (Eisenhardt, 1989). A snowball sampling technique was used, in which each respondent was asked to suggest another person with similar characteristics (that is, a person working within the childcare sector, or with a child enrolled in a centre) (Aaker et al., 2005). Nominated participants were then contacted by phone or email and sent an information sheet via fax or email explaining the purpose of the research and inviting them to participate in the study.

A research protocol was used to enhance validity through ensuring broad consistency across cases. Initial questions covered background and demographic facts. The second section of the interview protocol focused on respondent perceptions of quality in childcare centres. Respondents were initially asked to detail their current understanding and expectations regarding childcare quality and then further probing questions (for example,
‘Could you describe what childcare service quality means to you?’ and ‘Why is accreditation important to you?’ were used to elicit greater meaning and detail. Questions were deliberately broad in scope. Finally, interviews were conducted until data reached a point of saturation and no new themes emerged (McMurray et al., 2004).

As a result, a total of 21 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with childcare staff currently employed within community-based, independent-private and corporate chain long day care centres. In addition, a further 20 interviews were conducted with parents of children attending long day care in community, independent or corporate chain centres. Of the 41 semi-structured interviews, nine were conducted face-to-face in a variety of settings (mainly within respondents’ homes or workplaces in the south-east Queensland region). The remaining 32 interviews were conducted by telephone, with respondents located throughout south-east Queensland in Australia. Generally, interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes. The sample was diverse in its characteristics, and these are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Staff</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Range 20–44 years</td>
<td>Range 22–49 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Under 35 years N = 12</td>
<td>Less than three years N = 8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>35 years and over N = 8</td>
<td>Three years or more N = 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>$25,000 to $75,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of care</td>
<td>Corporate chain N = 6</td>
<td>Corporate chain N = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent-private N = 9</td>
<td>Independent-private N = 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community-based N = 5</td>
<td>Community-based N = 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>University degree N = 5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diploma N = 10</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Study in progress N = 6</td>
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Thematic analysis consisted of two phases, including conceptual seeding and relational (semantic) analysis. First, frequently used concepts such as ‘caregiver staff relationship’ and ‘provider responsiveness’ (around which other terms cluster) were identified. For example, terms such as ‘communication’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘culture’ congregated around the concept of ‘caregiver staff relationship’. Second, the co-occurrence of concepts within the text was assessed, and two concept maps were generated to depict staff and parental perceptions of service quality. Concept reduction resulted in the generation of ‘prototypical’ thematic circles that encompassed all other concepts in each map. The concept maps included the three main focal points of interest:

- caregiver-staff relationship
- regulated structural
- provider responsiveness.

The intersections of the thematic circles indicated specific linkages between identified concepts (such as ‘regulated structural’ and ‘provider responsiveness’) in the childcare staff concept map.

The themes (and associated sub-themes) that emerged from the interviews were categorised into three areas of quality. The first area, labeled ‘Centre’, included sub-themes relating to accreditation, group sizes, (caregiver) qualifications, safety (of building and grounds), toys and equipment, and government regulations. The next theme, labeled ‘Process’, included sub-themes relating to the emotional warmth of staff and child interactions, safety and health, stimulating toys and equipment, developmental activities, staff turnover (stability), and food and nutrition. The final theme was labeled ‘Interaction’ (by staff) and ‘Relationships’ (by parents), and included sub-themes relating to childcare staff knowledge and relationships with children, childcare staff knowledge of parental needs and expectations, parenting support and flexibility, and sensitivity to children’s cultural values. These categories (and many of the sub-themes) were found to be broadly consistent with previous categorisations of parental caregiver perceptions of childcare quality (for example, da Silva & Wise, 2006). Following assessment of the themes and associated sub-themes, the researchers re-labeled the theme descriptors to improve reader comprehension and highlight commonalities with previous research (for example, da Silva & Wise, 2006). In particular, the ‘Centre’ dimension was re-labeled ‘Regulated structural dimensions of quality’; ‘Process’ became ‘Provider responsiveness to developmental needs’; and ‘Interaction’ (staff) or ‘Relationships’ (parents) was re-named ‘Caregiver staff relationship with parents and children’. Concept maps depicting childcare staff and parental perceptions of quality in childcare are shown in Figure 1.
Findings

**Differences in parental and childcare staff perceptions of regulated structural dimensions of quality across alternative childcare service delivery governance structures.**

Previous research into the early childhood literature suggests that regulated structural aspects of childcare inform likely processes for quality outcomes (Phillipsen et al., 1997). In particular, staff–child ratios, group sizes and caregiver qualifications have consistently been shown to influence how caregivers interact with children in nurturing and intellectually-stimulating ways (for example, Whitebrook et al., 1989). In this study, a small number of childcare staff (11 in total) nominated structural dimensions of quality as important in this regard. In addition, seven out of eight experienced childcare staff (who had in excess of three years experience) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005) nominated structural issues as important components of childcare service quality. For example:

*Quality is all about the infrastructure. Things like group sizes, building standards, the programs and having qualified staff to run them.* (Childcare worker, community-based, six years experience)

In comparison, only three of the parent interviewees self-identified structural elements of quality (including toys and equipment, nutritious food, group sizes and centre accreditation) as important when assessing quality outcomes. For instance, one respondent stated that:

*After talking with my sister, we knew how important it was for centres to be accredited ... supervise small classes and have trained staff; otherwise quality is bound to suffer. This is exactly what happened to my sister after she had enrolled her children in a church-run centre in Sydney.* (Parent, private-independent)

When considering structural dimensions of service quality, a strong majority of childcare staff considered community-based centres and some high-quality, independently-operated private organisations to offer the best levels of care. Although only nine staff had worked in, or had previously been employed in, community-based centres, a total of 14 respondents ranked community-based centres above corporate chains, and on par with high-quality independent operations—in relation to the administration of staff–child ratios, capping group and class sizes, and recruiting professionally qualified staff (as opposed to training staff in-house). The next quotation is indicative of these responses:

*The difference between community and some private centres is that community centres are run by the government or managed by committees. We are not in it to make money, which means that they have the funding to make sure that we can employ the right kind of people and provide the right type of environment for children. When I was working in a private centre, we had poor changing facilities, which made hygiene issues a nightmare. Sometimes our staff wouldn’t check to see that no children were left behind at the end of the day. The owners kept on operating, which shows that there are real problems with monitoring [the] centres out there.* (Childcare staff, community-based centre, eight years experience)

![Figure 1. Concept maps depicting staff and parental perceptions of service quality](image-url)
However, when prompted, 14 parents nominated that independent private care offered higher levels of (regulated) structural dimensions of childcare service quality than centres administered by community or corporate governance structures. However, most parents commented that the structural dimensions of care in community centres were better than those offered in corporate chains. For instance:

I spoke with a lot of my friends before sending our child to [an independent-private centre], and we found that the recommendations were correct. Small classes and qualified directors and supervisors. I know that community centres offer this as well, but it can be really variable depending on who is running them. But they are definitely better than the [corporate chains]. I would think that [a corporate chain] would not manage these things as well, because they focus on expanding rather than managing any of their businesses. (Parent, independent-private)

Differences in parental and childcare staff perceptions of ‘provider responsiveness to developmental needs’ across alternative childcare service delivery governance structures.

The dimension of ‘provider responsiveness to developmental needs’ was rated by both parents and childcare staff as an important aspect of service quality in childcare service provision. This dimension related to the quality of services provided above legal minimum stipulations. A strong majority of interviewees equated quality with the emotional warmth of the caregiver staff; the provision of safe, clean environments and nutritious food at regular intervals; stimulating equipment; appropriate developmental activities; the use of inclusive group activities; and low levels of staff turnover. For example:

Safety is very important, but the way in which the centre and the staff present is equally important … I mean it defines the quality of care … I looked for staff that were warm, friendly and approachable. This makes me feel that they will go beyond doing just what they consider they ‘have to do’—much like what my children get at home. (Parent, corporate chain)

Although all childcare staff nominated this quality dimension as important in high-quality service delivery, it became apparent during the interviews that the more experienced staff nominated and emphasised the importance of many elements within this dimension (such as nurturing, proper nutrition, age-appropriate activities and safe work practices) in guiding the children’s developmental activities, and in defining their roles within the centre. In comparison, staff with less professional experience often tended to nominate one or two areas, mostly those concerned with safety and hygiene. The following statement is indicative of a majority of the more experienced caregiver responses:

We have an important role in developing young minds … and having the procedures in place to assist in their development. Just today, one boy in my three-to-five age group wasn’t getting involved with any of the other children. I spoke with him and we found out that he didn’t like painting on his bag, so we just painted on some paper and he was happy. So if I had to make everyone paint on bags to finish the activity, we would have had a problem. It’s about understanding what the policies mean and being flexible enough to ensure that individual children aren’t lost in the paperwork … (S)ome centres are better at doing this than others. (Childcare worker, corporate chain, five years experience)

When comparing this quality dimension across different childcare centre governance structures, younger parents associated quality with independent-private long day care centres, rather than community-based centres and corporate chains. A total of 12 parents aged less than 35 years believed that independent private centres were more responsive to the developmental needs of children. For example:

Private day care is like a tight family unit. This is different to the community ones or [corporate chains], because the staff are focused on providing the right equipment and activities to suit the children. You can talk to them about your child’s learning style … the larger [centres] are more about uniform procedures and profit. Everything’s about the look of the centre and the brand. (Parent, private-independent)

In addition, a majority of more experienced childcare staff held similar views. For example:

I would rate community and private care as generally the same when considering how in-tune the childcare centre is to a child’s individual needs. Having worked in a big chain, I know it’s all about adhering to the accreditation guidelines. They have observation checklists and so much paperwork to prevent any accidents, like child-biting or bullying. I don’t think it’s about … nurturing the child as much as it is about making the minimum standards and avoiding being sued. (Childcare worker, independent-private, five years experience)

In comparison, a majority of less-experienced childcare staff perceived that ‘provider responsiveness to developmental needs’ was superior in independent-private operations, when compared to community-based centres or corporate chains.

Differences in parental and childcare staff perceptions of ‘caregiver staff relationships with parents and children’ across alternative childcare service delivery governance structures.

Both parents and staff agreed that a close and personal relationship between caregiver staff, children and parents was necessary for providing high-quality outcomes for
children. A recurrent theme (revealed during the interviews) related to the need for staff approaches involving close behavioural observation and age-sensitive communication, so as to inform the appropriateness of current and future care and learning approaches. In particular, most parents and childcare staff alluded (both explicitly and implicitly) to benefits associated with staff and child interaction in developmental activities—which lends support to previous research examining the advantages of ‘joint attention episodes’ in childcare (Smith, 1999). For example:

I think that the number one thing in caring for children outside of the home is the warmth and friendliness of the staff. It’s all about leaving your children with people you can trust, people that will talk to your children and understand them. (Parent, independent-private)

In addition, a majority of childcare staff and parents agreed that by involving parents in daily activities, long day care centres were demonstrating an interest and commitment to their child’s development and wellbeing. For example:

I like how they get us to fill in a sheet about what we would like the children to be involved in, what they would be interested in. (Parent, community-based)

However, the interviews revealed that the more experienced staff tended to suggest that individual needs and centre sustainability were reliant upon promoting and maintaining close relationships with parents. In comparison, just over half of the less-experienced staff cautioned against excessive parental involvement in activities, as it resulted in unrealistic demands for additional programming flexibility, which in turn impacted upon developmental outcomes. For example:

I’m well aware of how important it is for parents to have a say in our programs, but it can go too far. I’m still new at this, but I’ve already seen how you get too much input, and not all of their demands are realistic. This makes it really awkward for us. I think sometimes parents think that they are qualified to run the centre, but they really aren’t. There are certain guidelines we have to stick to and we can’t have all of the group activities that are raised in our suggestion box. (Childcare worker, independent-private, seven years experience)

When prompted to discuss the quality of the relationship between parents and staff within the context of different childcare management models, a majority of parents and childcare staff believed that independent-private centres offer the highest level of care. Importantly, on many occasions, parents made a distinction between sole traders and private company ownership in independent day care operations. Sole traders were viewed as small family-run enterprises not comprising more than two centres. Larger independent-private centres were viewed as having three or more centres. A majority of parents believed that larger private centres encourage high levels of staff turnover and greater central administration, which impacts upon staff interaction with children, the involvement of parents in learning and development activities, and centre flexibility. For example:

In my experience, privately-owned centres definitely provide the best opportunity for parents to provide some input into class programming. But it has to be the right one. Our original place was 25 years old and owned by a lady who was really good with us. Then she bought three more centres through her company and all of the staff disappeared, and we found it hard to find someone to talk to. It all became increasingly confusing and the activities were changed and didn’t suit our child. So we left. It was a lot better when it was a smaller and more approachable business. (Parent, community-based)

Childcare staff rated the provider and customer care service dimension higher within independent-private centres, due to the perception that they offered better pay and conditions and more staff involvement in centre decision-making. However, community centres were rated as similarly effective in this regard.

Discussion

The findings suggest that both childcare staff and parents identified and attached importance to the procedural elements of childcare service delivery. In comparison, while most childcare staff self-identified (regulated) structural elements of childcare service delivery, only a small minority of parents rated these as important. This suggests that parents tend to associate quality with observable childcare experiences—such as child interactions with staff and peers—rather than classroom and centre structural elements. This is curious, given that structural dimensions (such as caregiver qualifications, group sizes and staff–child ratios) have been shown to predict childcare quality (Phillipsen et al., 1997) and are often detailed in the media in reported allegations of breaches in childcare service quality (Karvelas, 2007). In relation to staff perceptions, the more experienced childcare staff nominated structural issues as important measures of service quality. This may be a reflection of job tenure and an increasing emphasis on regulation and accountability in the Australian childcare sector. In support of this contention, recent studies confirm the impact of changing regulations and quality-assurance practices on job satisfaction, teaching performance and perceptions of acceptable teaching practices (Hatch & Grieshaber, 2002; Sumson, 2006a).

The dimension relating to the relationship between childcare staff and parents and children was perceived as the most important measure of quality in childcare services. Both parents and childcare staff believed that ongoing communication and observation was important in gauging the effectiveness of current learning approaches and identifying areas for improvement, so as
to accommodate individual learning demands. Importantly, most interviewees suggested that 'joint or shared attention' episodes were important features of high-quality classroom environments. In particular, a majority of parents and staff believed that children's learning outcomes are significantly improved when activities include shared experiences, warm interaction and meaningful conversation—a concept which has some prior support in the literature (Smith, 1999). When considering the relationship between staff and parents, most agreed that open communication between the childcare provider and parents assisted in meeting the daily needs of the children. However, less-experienced childcare staff placed clear limits on the extent of parental involvement in activities, citing difficulties in accommodating unrealistic demands on program content and delivery. This is a surprising result given the close contact that staff have with parents but may be indicative of increasing client and distractive demands placed upon childcare staff (Fenech et al., 2006).

When considering different organisational governance structures, clear distinctions between childcare worker and parental perceptions of quality were evident (Figure 2). Overall, parents consistently viewed independent-private and community-based centres as providing the highest levels of care, in relation to regulated structural dimensions of service quality. Although both centres were rated favourably on all structural dimensions, independent-private centres were viewed as marginally superior in meeting (and exceeding) minimum regulatory stipulations (higher numbers of qualified staff per child and smaller class sizes across age groups), as they were generally owned by a sole proprietor who had a significant financial and operational stake in the centre. Moreover, parents perceived that private centres also offered the highest levels of care in promoting hygienic and safe learning environments for children; providing nutritious food, and stimulating toys and equipment; developing appropriate developmental activities; and administering group activities. In addition, private centres were viewed as providing financial and professional development incentives that were effective in retaining experienced staff, who are thus able to develop close relationships with parents and children. However, older parents nominated community-based care as providing similar levels of high-quality care in relation to provider responsiveness to developmental needs and staff relationships with parents and children.

In comparison, childcare staff perceived community-based care to be of marginally higher quality than independent-private centres, as they often exceeded minimum state regulations regarding staff–child ratios, numbers of qualified and experienced staff, class sizes, and physical infrastructure (in particular, playground facilities and outside areas). In terms of provider responsiveness to developmental needs, the amount of staff-member experience in the industry influenced quality perceptions—less-experienced staff perceived that independent-private operations provided higher levels of quality, largely due to a belief that staff had some decision-making involvement with the directors.
in relation to the policies governing staff duties and responsibilities. At the classroom level, the more experienced staff believed that community centres were marginally better in providing nutritious food at regular intervals (and in appropriate quantities), sourcing and replacing new toys as required, maintaining safe and clean environments across all age groups, and designing developmentally sound developmental activities.

The results suggest that corporate chains are perceived by both parents and childcare staff as providing lower levels of service quality than both non-profit community-based and for-profit independent-private childcare centres. Generally, corporate chains were rated lower on all factors, due to a general perception that they focused on generating profits, rather than on service provision. Although a few examples of poor-quality care were discussed in relation to independent-private centres, numerous concerns about corporate chains were raised—including compliance with minimum staff–child ratios and class sizes, employment of excessive numbers of unqualified staff, employee job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, staff turnover, and an over-reliance on relief staff. When considering the responsiveness of the centre to the developmental needs of children, most interviewees cited concern with the prominence attached to corporate brands and the physical appearance of the centres, rather than the learning program structure and activities. Similarly, the standardised nature of centre operations was viewed as restricting staff time with children (due to their excessive paperwork requirements), thus limiting the potential to establish and nurture secure attachment relationships with the children, which has some support in prior research (Rush, 2006). In addition, the structure of corporate chains was often perceived by interviewees as limiting staff involvement in the management of daily activities and precluding staff contributions to centre policy reviews and formation.

**Limitations and future research directions**

A key limitation of this study is that only a small sample of caregiver staff and parents were interviewed, and not all respondents had direct experience with each of the non-profit or for-profit centre variants examined within this research. This limitation could be overcome in future studies through investigating the perceptions of a larger sample of parents and childcare staff. In addition, as the research was conducted using a realist paradigm and qualitative methodology, analytical (and not statistical) generalisability may be claimed (Johnson, 1997; Yin, 2003). While different regulations do apply throughout the states and territories in Australia, this research sought to identify general perceptions of quality in long day care service provision. Future research should be collected from a broad geographic spread of areas (urban, inner and outer regional, remote and very remote communities) and investigate the role of centre size, economic status and cultural influences on these perceptions (Bergin-Seers & Breen, 2002; Sims, 2003). Furthermore, as this research focused on comparing quality perceptions of caregiver staff and parents (who may or may not fully appreciate the nature of developmental programming activities), the findings strongly reflect relationship and procedural elements of childcare service delivery. Future research should investigate associations between children’s developmental activities and service quality perceptions.

**Conclusion**

This article sought to explore and compare parental and childcare staff perceptions of quality, within the context of different childcare organisational governance approaches. Quality appears predicated upon system size, the centralisation of management, and stakeholder responsibilities. While independent-private owner-operators (operating one or two units) were applauded for actively generating flexible and responsive approaches to achieving quality outcomes for children, corporate centres were viewed as following a business model that abrogated both direction and responsibility to centralised operations, far removed from the individual centre operations. The resultant perceptions of inflexible, remote and exclusive management practices, shareholder responsibilities and demands, and the overriding value attached to brand-building and generating profits, all question the applicability and role of corporatised services in childcare. Perhaps a more critical, ethical review of childcare corporatisation, as proposed by Sumson (2006b), is warranted to establish the current and future role of corporatised childcare services and inform public policy, so as to ensure consistent high-quality service provision, regardless of ownership or the management structure of childcare centres.

**References**


Chinese children’s understanding of death

Mun Wong
The Hong Kong Institute of Education

THIS PAPER INVESTIGATES YOUNG children’s understanding of death. Research on this topic among preschool children is limited, especially in the context of Chinese culture. A total of 26 young children aged five to six years, drawn from two classes at a preschool in Hong Kong, participated in the study. In documenting children’s views on death, this study contributes to an understanding of death education in a preschool context, and explores possible ways of helping children to cope with the associated emotions. Through the use of open-ended measures, the children were asked to describe their experiences and views related to death. The children’s conceptions could be grouped into four themes:

1. causality
2. emotional reaction
3. death-related sociocultural practices
4. character status.

Finally, the various factors that contribute to children’s understanding of death and use of coping strategies are discussed.

Introduction

CHILDREN ARE OFTEN UNPREPARED to deal with the death of a loved one, because they lack the knowledge or experience of adults (Cox, Garrett & Graham, 2004–2005). When children experience such a loss, they may feel fear, sadness, guilt, desperation or helplessness (Bluebond-Langner, 1989; Goldman, 2004), and have difficulty articulating their feelings (Busch & Kimble, 2001). If the negative emotions associated with death are not adequately addressed during their early years, they may have psychiatric difficulties as adults (Dowdney et al., 1999; Naierman, 1997).

Since children may receive misguided, false or abstract information about death from various media, Lee, Lee and Moon (2009) maintain that it is essential that social agents (parents or teachers) are able to assist in children’s understanding of death. This study observed how Chinese children construct the meaning of death, by investigating teacher–child dialogues in the Hong Kong preschool context. No other study has examined young children’s concept of death in this particular context.

Most research on children’s conceptions of death has involved primary school children and adolescents. The focus has been on children’s understanding of the subconcepts of death—namely universality, inevitability, irreversibility/finality, causality and non-functionality (Brent et al., 1996; Nguyen & Gelman, 2002; Poling & Evans, 2004; Sheldon, 1998; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). The methods used to explore these concepts have included both closed and open interviews. In interviews using closed questions, such as ‘If a flower dies, can the same flower come back to life?’, participants need only answer yes or no (Nguyen & Gelman, 2002, p. 498). However, the limitation of closed interviews is that they do not ask children to elaborate on their views. Open-ended questions, on the other hand, allow adults to elicit dialogues with young
children—leaving them free to express their feelings, and impressions of, and experiences with, death.

In open-ended interviews (Nguyen & Gelman, 2002; Poling & Evans, 2004), questions such as ‘Can you tell me something that might happen that would make someone die?’ were used (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007, p. 529). In these studies, children were interviewed individually by a researcher. Very little research has examined child–child dialogues on death (such as children's understanding of what a funeral is or their emotional reactions towards death) (see, for example, Löfdahl, 2005), and no study was found that examined how children construct a shared meaning of death in teacher–child dialogues in the preschool context.

Previous studies on older children's views on death have largely used phenomenographic methods, which require the participants to create drawings (such as Tamm & Granqvist, 1995; Wainwright, 1987; Wenestam & Wess, 1987; Yang & Chen, 2002). The limitation of this method is that it largely depends on a child’s ability to illustrate the concept of death through drawing a picture. To gain insight into children's understandings in relation to a topic, Hutchins and Sims (2000) argue that researchers should observe how teachers and children construct and share meaning together when they are actively engaged in sociocultural activities.

**Culture, grief and continuing bonds**

Rosenblatt (2008) has argued that death research based on Euro-American culture, which largely interprets grief and recovery as an individual process of ‘redefining the self and reintegrating the bereaved into life’ (p. 6), might not be generalisable to different cultures, since grief is perceived as a collective process in some cultures (e.g. the Maori culture in New Zealand). Research on the bereavement process of Chinese families has found that the Chinese focus on reconnection with the deceased instead of seeking recovery following bereavement (Hsu et al., 2004).

Finding ways to stay connected with the deceased occurs naturally across cultures (Chan et al., 2005; Hsu et al., 2004; Lalande & Bonanno, 2006; Packman et al., 2006), but the effectiveness of continuing bonds as part of coping with grief varies across cultures (Lalande & Bonanno, 2006). Rosenblatt (2008) concludes that it is important to ‘learn, understand and use the culturally based terms and realities people themselves use’ (p. 14) to fully understand the bereavement process or concept of death across cultures.

**Children's conceptions of death**

Research has shown that three- and four-year-olds spontaneously talk about death and are able to make sense of the causality between illness and death (Löfdahl, 2005). Different themes about death have been identified in school children’s drawings, including causality of death, depictions of religious symbols and the nature of death (Wenestam, 1984), biological concepts, psychological concepts, and the metaphysical concept of death (Tamm & Granqvist, 1995; Yang & Chen, 2002). It has consistently been found that biological death conceptions dominate frequency over those of psychological death (Tamm & Granqvist, 1995; Yang & Chen, 2002).

As a result of their cognitive abilities and limited experiences, preschool children may not fully understand that death is irreversible, inevitable and non-functional for all living things. Children often feel that they have caused the death and so develop a sense of guilt after the loss of a parent or sibling (Brent et al., 1996; Cox et al., 2004–2005; Goldman, 2004; Grollman, 1990; Willis, 2002). It is therefore important to study young children’s views and emotions associated with death, so that teachers and parents can explore ways of helping them cope with these emotions (Cox et al., 2004–2005).

**Talking with children about death**

When children experience the death of someone they know, parents should not pressure themselves to explain the finality of death—rather, they should focus instead on the importance of effective bonding in the family (Busch & Kimble, 2001). Children need to express feelings and thoughts for the deceased in a manner most appropriate to individual characteristics (Busch & Kimble, 2001; Cox et al., 2004–2005; Goldman, 2004; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005; Willis, 2002) and coping styles (Packman et al., 2006). After the death of a sibling, some children choose to express their grief openly, while others prefer private ways of expressing sorrow (Packman et al., 2006). After verbalising and writing about his feelings concerning multiple losses of family members, a seven-year-old boy commented, ‘This helps to wash away my sadness, but also to remember them; I loved them so much’ (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005, p. 243). Teachers and parents should acknowledge and validate children’s feelings, and ‘teach them how to express them appropriately and in a healthy manner for them’ (Sorin, 2005, p. 40). Thus, on the basis of this review of the existing literature, a study was designed to explore how teachers could talk about death with young children.

**The study**

Previous research has shown that most children aged five to six years have begun to understand that death is final and permanent (Lee, Lee & Moon, 2009; Nguyen & Gelman, 2002; Poling & Evans, 2004; Sheldon, 1998), and they have either had prior experience of death (for example, of pets or relatives) or have learned about it...
through the mass media (Cox et al., 2004–2005; Lee et al., 2009). Kaufman and Kaufman (2005) showed that children need to talk about the emotions associated with death in order to cope with their loss and fear. Therefore, the present study predicted that with the support of teachers, children would be open to the idea of talking about their views on death.

The study used open-ended interviews to investigate the views and emotions that preschool children from Hong Kong had towards death. A visit to a cemetery provided the children with an opportunity to talk about their views and feelings. The study thus contributes to an understanding of preschool children’s conceptions of death, so that teachers will have a clearer idea of how they can help children cope with loss and reduce anxiety. The questions addressed in this study include the following:

- What themes or constructs are evoked in teacher–child dialogues about death?
- How do children interpret the concept of death?
- What are children’s experiences of coping with the death of a loved one?

**Method**

The study involved 26 preschool children aged from five years and four months to six years and three months (M = six years and one month, nine girls and 17 boys). The children were recruited from two classes in a school that was involved in a five-year project in Hong Kong on implementing a socioemotional program for promoting children’s emotional health—known as The Zippy’s Friends Project (Wong, 2008). This is the only regular preschool program for young children in Hong Kong that includes death education.

All parents of the five- and six-year-olds from the participating preschool classes were informed of the aims of the study during a parents’ meeting. Written consent from the parents and verbal consent from the school head and children were obtained at the beginning of the study. Children had the right to withdraw from the visit if they wanted. All of the children whose parents had consented were interested in the visit, and were curious in asking questions about death.

A visit to a cemetery is one of the activities in the socioemotional program (Partnership for Children & Hong Kong Institute of Education, 2004). It aims to encourage children to talk about their views, feelings and coping strategies related to death. During the visit, the teacher emphasised that sadness as a response to death is acceptable and normal behaviour. The Gallant Garden is a cemetery for the burial of civilians who died showing exceptional bravery on duty. It was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, the children were familiar with the deaths of the civilians as depicted in various media thereby providing them with a relevant context within which the teachers could discuss the deaths. Second, a large garden attached to the cemetery provided a pleasant area for the children to sit in a circle and talk.

The study recorded two visits to the graveyard by two groups. The first visit included 12 children, and the second 14. Each visit included a 30-minute walk around the cemetery, a 15 minute break and a 30-minute group interview. At the end, the children were asked to draw a picture of the visit. Group interviews using open-ended questions were used to elicit spontaneous teacher–child or child–child dialogues, which gave the children opportunities to exchange their views and feelings about death. Two teachers from the preschool had been trained in basic interview techniques and served as the interviewers during the study visits. The group interview was started by the teacher, who shared her experience of the loss of a loved one and invited the children to talk about their own experience, by asking them questions such as:

- Have you experienced the death of a loved one?
- Have you heard any news about death (from radio or TV)?
- How do you feel when someone (such as your dog, grandpa or a police officer) dies?
- Why are you feeling sad?
- Do you cry or talk to someone when you feel sad?
- What did you do to make yourself feel better?

These questions aimed to encourage the children to express their views and experiences. Each child could choose whether or not to respond during the interviews. Both visits were videotaped, and field notes were made for further analysis.

All teacher–child and child–child dialogues were transcribed and the children’s feelings and impressions about death categorised into different themes, according to the previous studies of Yang and Chen (2006, 2002), Tamm and Granqvist (1995), and Wenestam (1984). These included the following three themes:

1. causality (i.e. natural, violent or accidental death)
2. emotional reaction (including frustration, anger, sadness or helplessness)
3. sociocultural practices surrounding death

These items reflected the predominant cultural practices or religious orientation regarding death that are present in Hong Kong (e.g. offerings at the tomb, paying respect to ancestors and communicating with the deceased) (Chan et al., 2005).

All dialogues between the children, their peers and the teacher in the first visit were independently coded.
by the author and a trained research assistant. Interrater reliability was found to be high (Cohen's Kappa = 0.9). The small number of disagreements were resolved through discussion. The author then coded all transcriptions of the children and their teacher from the second visit.

Results

First, the children's comments were sorted into three pre-identified themes:

- causality
- emotional reactions
- sociocultural practices surrounding death.

Subsequently, the children's views on coping with the loss of a loved one were analysed. It was found that some narrative responses did not fit the pre-determined categories, and so a fourth category—character status, based on Cox, Garrett and Graham's (2004–2005) study on death in Disney films—was added. Children talked about the character status of the deceased, which included a protagonist (the good guy) and an antagonist (the bad guy).

Causality of death

During the visit, some of the children talked about the deaths of their grandparents due to illness, while others asked the teacher to read aloud the information presented on the tombstones about the different causes of death, which included violence and accidents (e.g. a police officer killed by a shooter or a traffic accident). Children recognised death as a consequence of violence. They stopped at the tomb of a police officer and spontaneously discussed the cause of his death. They were familiar with the event because it had been reported in the mass media.

Child J: 'A thief killed him last time. (Girl, six years and three months)

Child D: 'No. He (the police officer) called the police and said something was happening. He was killed by L (another police officer who was later killed in another event). (Boy, five years and nine months)

Emotions associated with character status

When the children were drawing pictures of the visit, one child drew a picture about the death of the police officer killed by the shooter, and wrote, 'I am not happy.'

Teacher: Why are you not happy?

Child L: Because he [the police officer] died so young. (Boy, six years and four months)

Teacher: He is young. You are right. I think his wife, mother and family members would be very sad.

Child L: He has a son. He [the son] must be so sad that he might wish to commit suicide.

The children had a tendency to judge the death of a protagonist as unjustified. They felt sorry about the death of the young police officer but did not have the same feelings towards the shooter responsible for the police officer’s death. A boy (aged six) said that he would not be the shooter’s friend, while another said that, ‘he [the shooter] is a bad guy.’ A girl (aged five years and nine months) stated that the police officer suspected of having killed other officers did not deserve to be buried in the Gallant Garden.

Emotional reaction to the loss of a loved one

The teacher started the group interview by sharing her experience with death. Some children with recent experiences of the death of a family member (grandparent or sibling) talked about their sorrow. Children from both groups were generally not expected to cry at the funeral, and often their parents had not discussed the death with them.

Teacher: My grandpa died of illness. (Three children responded that their grandfathers had also died.)

Child L: My grandpa died naturally. I was very sad. (Boy, six years and four months)

Teacher: Did you cry?

Child L: I tried to control myself.

Teacher: Why didn’t you cry?

Child L: [At the funeral] I cried, but my daddy asked me to go outside. So I didn’t.

The child told the teacher that he had not talked to anyone about his feelings and that, ’it was okay after a while.’

A child from another class had experienced the death of his baby siblings (twins) a few weeks before the visit and spontaneously talked about his parents’ and grandparents’ sorrow at the death of the babies. The teacher encouraged him to talk about his experience of attending his siblings’ funeral.

Child M: [It was] cremation. (Boy, six years and two months)

Another child: Like my grandpa.

The teacher asked whether he (Child M) had seen the babies’ bodies.

Child M: No! Mother did not want me to cry ... I saw mother and grandpa crying (after seeing the babies’ bodies). I also wanted to cry. I was not happy ... I’m still feeling not happy when I talk
When the teacher asked the child what might make him feel better, he said he could talk about something happy. He thought that the twins’ deaths could have been avoided if they had gotten help from the doctor: ‘They [doctors] could have saved their life, but it was too late … [M]other did not know; [and] the doctor was sleeping because it was very late.’

Another boy (aged five years and 11 months) had observed his mother crying at the hospital and he had also wanted to cry after he saw his grandfather dying. He had tried to cheer his mother up, and it was helpful to talk to the teacher: ‘I feel better after talking about it.’ A girl (aged five years and nine months) shared the same feeling: ‘It’s harsh if you keep it in your heart. [You] want to say something but cannot express it.’

This study showed that these young children experienced sadness when their loved one died. Many of them spoke about wanting to cry but did not know how to express their feelings.

**Sociocultural practices surrounding death**

Children were interested in the sociocultural practices surrounding death. One girl (aged five years and nine months) asked why gold is commonly used for tombs. The teacher explained that gold has a symbolic meaning; it represents people of high status; and was also a way of paying respect to ancestors. Children shared their experiences of tomb sweeping, which is the way in which the Chinese honour their ancestors. Tomb sweeping includes cleaning the grave and setting out offerings (Chinese Cultural Centre of San Francisco, 2000). Some children asked whether the dead person would actually take the flowers or eat the offerings.

Child A: How can we do the tomb sweeping when it [the body] became ash? (Girl, six years and four months)

The teacher explained that the deceased could not take the offerings; rather, it was a way for the living to express their feelings and pay respect towards the deceased. The teacher and children then talked about maintaining bonds with the deceased.

Teacher: I was very sad [when my grandpa died], because my grandpa loved me so much … Even though he has left us, I still want to communicate with him.

Child A: We need to communicate.

Teacher: Yes. I would talk to him and I would let him know what has happened at home.

Child G: I think your grandpa can see you, because he is in heaven. (Boy, six years and two months)

Coping with loss

It was found that often parents did not want their children to cry at the funeral and some children stated that they had coped with their loss passively.

Child B: I was not happy [when grandpa died] … My heart was sad. (He told his teacher that he had not expressed his feelings to anyone at home.) (Boy, five years and seven months)

Teacher: What did you do to make yourself feel better when you were not happy?

Child B: Sleep. I forgot about it after sleeping.

During the visit, the teacher invited the children to think about ways that might help people to cope with the loss of a loved one. There were differences between the two groups. The first class suggested taking a nap, playing with their favourite toys and making a statue to remember their grandfather. The other class, which included children with recent experiences involving the death of a family member, suggested crying and talking to someone: ‘Seeing you cry, but not knowing why … she [mother] would be unhappy.’ A boy (five years and 11 months), who had experienced the death of his grandfather around the time of the visit, said that he was ‘feeling better after talking about it.’

**Discussion and conclusions**

Children’s development can only be understood in the context of their social situation, which ‘is determined by the society and cultural context in which the child is embedded’ (Fleer, 2006, p. 132). The discussion of this study ties into the culture of Hong Kong. The children displayed a need to express their feelings and ask questions about death. Their conceptions of death fell into four themes:

1. causality
2. emotional reaction
3. sociocultural practices
4. character status.

The first three themes were consistent with previous studies on older children’s conceptions of death (Tamm & Granqvist, 1995; Wenestam, 1984; Wenestam & Wass, 1987; Yang & Chen, 2002), however such studies had not reported children using character status to talk about death. Consistent with other studies (Cox et al., 2004–2005; Poling & Evans, 2004; Willis, 2002), a child in the present study thought that his siblings’ deaths could have been avoided. As suggested by Slaughter and Griffiths’ (2007) review of the literature, this could be because preschool children tend to consider death as something that can be avoided by healthy living.

The first theme to emerge from the interviews was the different causes of death. Consistent with previous research on the development of conceptions of death in children (Wenestam, 1984; Yang & Chen, 2002),
biological concepts, especially those of violent death ('A thief killed him!'), were common themes. The cemetery chosen was one for the burial of civilians, many of whom were police officers, which may have elicited the children's discussion of violent death and the character status of the deceased. Future studies should investigate children's conceptions of death in different contexts, such as adult–child dialogues about a dead pet, visits to a grandparent's tomb, or death scenes in stories.

Children who had had recent experience with the death of a grandparent talked about 'natural death' ('My grandpa died naturally'). Their understanding of events influences their own wellbeing (Fallin, Wallinga & Coleman, 2001; Hyson, 2004). Young children may experience extreme guilt when a sibling or parent dies (Goldman, 2004; Kübler-Ross, 1983; Willis, 2002). Thus, adults should explain the causality of death as well as assist children in the expression of their emotions (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005), and help them to reorganise their sense of identity or relationships with others, so that they might overcome their grief after a loss (Baker, Sedney & Gross, 1992).

The second theme of the children's views on death was related to the emotions associated with character status. The children were empathetic with the police officer killed by the shooter ('I am not happy. He died so young!') but disapproved of the actions of the shooter killed by the police ('I would not be his friend'; 'He is a bad guy'). Since the deaths of protagonists and antagonists are frequently portrayed in Disney films, Cox et al. (2004–2005) hypothesised that they might affect children's judgments on the extent to which members of each category were deserving of death. The mass media in Hong Kong had largely described the shooter in this case as evil and cruel—which might have affected the children's views on his death. This study therefore offers some evidence to support Cox et al.'s (2004–2005) hypothesis, however further studies are needed to fully explore the impact of the mass media on children's conceptions of death.

The third theme to emerge from the teacher–child dialogues was the emotional reaction associated with death. Yang and Chen's (2002) phenomenographic study of Taiwanese children showed that only 2.1 per cent of the participating school children had expressed death-related emotions in their paintings (N = 239) and no significant differences emerged between age groups. Children's tendency to talk about sorrow may be affected by factors other than cognitive ability, which might be attributable to the Chinese tradition of regarding death as a taboo that adults should seldom talk about with children (Yang & Chen, 2002).

The Chinese children in this study expressed sorrow associated with death, even though their vocabulary was limited ('being not happy', 'cried', 'sad'). The main differences in children's tendency to talk about sorrow as displayed in different studies may result from the methods used. In phenomenographic studies, children were asked to 'make drawings depicting what came to their mind when they heard the word 'death'' (Yang & Chen, 2002, p. 148), and to give a brief commentary on their picture. Yang and Chen (2002) argued that the phenomenographic approach captures children's true feelings about, and impressions of, death. However, children might find it easier to draw pictures related to the biological concept of death (such as people being killed in a car collision) than the psychological concept of death (such as sorrow). Another limitation of the phenomenographic approach is that children may not talk about emotions related to death, since they were not asked to do so. The advantage of using open-ended measures, as in this study, is that the teacher can ask questions related to both biological and psychological concepts.

Yang and Chen (2002) found no significant difference among death concept categories as a function of funeral attendance or prior death experiences. However, this study suggests that preschool children's prior experiences and the characteristics of those experiences may influence their conception of death. Children who had experienced the loss of siblings or grandparents talked more about their emotional reactions and used more emotional coping strategies than the other children. These children had observed parents crying at the funeral or hospital, had experienced sorrow, and had learned that crying and expressing their feelings could help them to cope with the sorrow. Since children generally believe that death happens only to the aged (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007) and because the death of an infant is deeply mourned in Asian culture (Lobar et al., 2006), the death of baby siblings might elicit stronger emotions in a child.

Whether their parents had encouraged them to express sorrow or not may also have influenced the children's tendency to express emotional reactions in the study. Children who did not have the chance to express their sorrow to others tended to use other coping strategies, such as sleeping or playing, to forget about the sadness. When a family member dies, Chinese adults tend to pretend to be strong in order to reduce the worries of other family members (Chan et al., 2005). This may explain why some children reported that their parents had not expressed their sorrow to them and had actively discouraged them from crying at the funeral. The children had come to expect certain behaviours from teachers or parents in particular circumstances and used this as a guide to behaviour in new situations (Hutchins & Sims, 2000). Teachers and parents should acknowledge and validate children's feelings, and be good models in expressing their own emotions (Sorin,
The children in this study were also interested in sociocultural practices and the afterlife. This offers some evidence to support Harris and Giménez’s (2005) finding that children of approximately six years of age tend to judge that a body or mind stops functioning after death. However, they are more likely to believe that the mind or body of the deceased can continue to function in the context of a religious, rather than a secular, narrative. One girl in this study asked the teacher how people could honour the deceased when the body had become ash. She might have held the idea that when a body turns to ash, it can no longer function. Some children thought that the deceased person would actually take the offerings and would watch people on earth from heaven. This could be because preschool children tend to understand death as ‘an altered state of living, either in heaven, or underground in the tomb’ (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007, p. 526).

Children’s views of the afterlife may also be affected by their family’s religious orientation and cultural views (Willis, 2002), such as Chinese ancestral worship, Buddhism, Taoism or Christian beliefs about the soul of the deceased (Yang & Chen, 2002). Chinese adults like to talk about the afterlife of the deceased (Chan et al., 2005). In Hsu et al. (2004), mothers who maintained continuing bonds with their deceased fathers reassured children that the deceased parents were not forgotten, helped the children to overcome grief and maintained feelings of wholeness and harmony within the Chinese family. The teacher in this study talked about having a continuing bond with her beloved grandfather. These cultural factors may explain why some children in this study thought that the deceased would continue to communicate with and observe people on Earth. Lanlande and Bonanno (2006) argue that whether continuing bonds can help people cope with the death of a close family member depends on whether the bereaved are ‘socially connected to a supportive family and friends’ (p. 321).

Teachers may encourage children to maintain a healthy continuing bond with the deceased family member in the early months of bereavement. However, children also need to learn that the continuing bond with the deceased will change over time and adults need to help them learn ‘how to be and act in the world without those we love by our side’ (Packman et al., 2006, p. 838).

This was an exploratory study of a classroom practice that shows how teachers can talk about death with preschool children. The children were generally very open to speaking about death and bereavement, which included discussion of the character status of the deceased, emotional reactions, causality and sociocultural practices surrounding death. The children also incorporated their knowledge of illness, violence, accidents and personal experiences with death. In common with previous studies (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005; Willis, 2002), this study shows that it is essential that children be allowed to express their feelings about loss in their own way. The children shared the different coping strategies that had helped them cope with grief, such as crying, talking to the teacher and visiting their grandmother after their grandfather had died. Again, in common with other studies (Lawrence et al., 2005–2006; Busch & Kimble, 2001), the children who had personal experience with death had found that seeking comfort from peers and teachers and focusing on the affective bonding in the family helped them to cope more easily with the loss of a loved one. Busch and Kimble (2001) explain that such actions could help children reduce their sense of isolation when they experience the loss of a family member.

Fear of death has been found to begin at age five (Muris et al., 2000), whereas ‘more mature death understanding was associated with lower levels of death fear, when age and general anxiety were controlled’ (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007, p. 525). There are many books that have been designed to help children understand death and cope with grief (Corr, 2003–2004; Poling & Hupp, 2008). Parents and teachers can help children to understand death by reading books about death to them (Willis, 2002). For instance, Charlotte’s web (White, 2003) depicts the natural life cycle of a spider, who is well remembered by her beloved friends after her death. Since children often cannot express their feelings, teachers should label their emotions, to help them identify those that are associated with loss (Sorin, 2005). Since death is often sudden and unexpected, adults should help children understand the concept of death and construct effective coping strategies so that they will be better able to cope with loss in the future.

References


Author note

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to WONG Mun, Department of Early Childhood Education, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, New Territories, Hong Kong SAR. Email: awong@ied.edu.hk
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