Original Research Study

Parent Education and Support through Early Childhood Centre Networks

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Abstract

Beyond the acknowledgement of parents' considerable influence over their children, there are burgeoning concerns that when families are dysfunctional they have societal as well as local impact. In response there has been a steady growth of parent support programmes, recently documented as most successful when conducted within naturally occurring networks. This paper draws upon a study that set out to examine support for mothers in four New Zealand early childhood centres. Mothers gained support, uniquely responsive to child driven needs, through their own active relationship building and contribution to the centre community. Teachers and mothers held different definitions of support, resulting in the quality being compromised when teachers responded with low level socially co-operative practices. It is recommended that there be a greater emphasis on shared responsibility between teachers and parents to allow increased opportunities for parent contribution and increase resources within the centre community.

Key Words: Parent support; mothers; teacher-parent relationships; parent education

Introduction

Effective parenting has benefits for individuals and societies. However, parenting is complex, stressful, not necessarily an inborn capacity and functions over a sustained period. Increasingly it has been recognised that important success factors are parents' sense of wellbeing and confidence in their role, supported by relevant information. Consequently, since the sixties (in the absence of an established sector for parent education) attempts have been made to address this through a variety of programmes (Whalley, 2002; Wiggins, Rosato, Austerberry, Sawtell & Oliver, 2005; Zigler, 1979). These interventions have taken various forms, with a more recent shift towards helping parents within their naturally occurring networks. This has been conceived as an important advance, because of the way it capitalises on local knowledge and low level disruption of everyday life (Walker & Riley, 2001). Early childhood centres are a prime example of this type of community support network in operation, with their specific focus on early development and education. Traditionally, parents have always been involved in early childhood services in New Zealand and this is enshrined in legislation (Ministry of Education 1996a; 1996b; 2000; 2002). Beginning in the 1980s, Meade and Podmore (2002) traced the development of government policy initiatives and reflected on the changing model worldwide, to moving beyond the provision of pre-school education just for the child, to provision for their

families. Similarly, Mitchell (2003) documented how this latest provision has shifted from parent education alone, to the wider meaning of parent support.

This paper is drawn from a larger study where mothers' and teachers' perspectives were sought on the nature and availability of support for mothers, in four different types of early childhood centre programmes. Interviews and diaries were used to generate information to answer the following research questions: How do mothers and teachers define support? To what degree do mothers believe they gain support from their early childhood centre and is it adjusted to their needs over time?

Literature Review

Defining Support

There is much literature on early childhood centres as a community network for parents where parents gain support for themselves personally, as well as in their parenting role (Powell, 1989; Powell, Adams, Cullen, Marshall & Duncan, 2005; Renwick, 1985; Smith, Grima, Gaffney, Powell, Masse, & Barnett, 2000). Different terms are used and often interchangeably to define support (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Powell, 1989; Mitchell, 2003).

Mothers in an early childhood programmes tend to perceive support to be a combination of: empathy, practical help and wide spectrum knowledge that are gained through participation in social processes within their centres. Support was expressed by mothers as engendering feelings of: confidence, personal wellbeing and incremental mastery over a range of fundamental knowledge about themselves and their child (Albritton, Klotz, & Roberson, 2003; Churchill, 2003; Cochran, Larner, Riley, Gunnarson & Henderson, 1990; Smith et al., 2005; Walker & Riley, 2001). Conversely teachers it seems, believe support to be narrowly confined to discrete parent education packages, delivered by teachers through passive processes, rather than being a product of the wider community. Teachers consider their role with parents to be one of disseminators of trained information, whereby they 'give' support to parents as passive recipients (Bowman, 1997; Galinsky, 1990; Grey & Horgan, 2003; Konzal, 2000; Lubeck, deVries, Nicholson & Post, 2000; Powell, 1989; Rogoff, Goodman, Turkanis & Bartlett, 2001).

The absence of a shared view of support between parents and teachers has considerable implications for parent support in centres (Perry, 1999; Powell, 1997). As teachers are the authority in centres what happens there naturally reflects their attitudes (Smith et al., 2000). Subsequently, their belief about support being passive and staff directed, rather than a product of community interaction is responsible for the latter being given a low priority in programmes. Apart from a lack of recognition of the processes involved in parent support, teachers are also constrained by doubts as to what their responsibilities towards parents are and how to reconcile this with their all consuming focus on children (Mitchell, 2003). Rogoff et al. (2001), Whalley (2002) and Wenger (1999) suggest that an attitudinal shift by teachers towards a greater understanding of parents' needs as well as how they may be better accommodated within more collaborative systems is needed. Draper and Duffy (2006) propose that teachers should be given training in adult education.

Apart from teachers' attitudes, there are other factors determining the degree to which centre environments are amenable to parent participation for support, such as: the type of building and the education or care purpose of the service (Dalli, 1997). Whilst teachers may have little jurisdiction over some of these issues, Smith et al. (2000) argue they have the authority so it is their responsibility to take leadership. In this regard, coming to a shared definition of

support through increased co-operation between parents and teachers, will promote common goals. Chief amongst these is recognition of the importance of family in the development and welfare of children and this is enshrined in legislation (MOE, 2002). Socially co-operative practices with parents should be an integral part of early childhood programmes rather than an adjunct.

In the present study, while it is recognised that both mothers and fathers have equal responsibility as parents, mothers were the chosen focus, in the belief that rather than being amorphous mothers' and fathers' needs are different. Authors have argued that becoming a parent has a different impact on mothers' health, career, income and social network interruption (Butler, McLeod, Davie, Manley, Paterson & Stewart, 2000; Powell & Powell, 2001; Smith et al., 2000).

The Need for Support

The rationale that new mothers need support is well substantiated in the literature (Butler et al., 2000; Cochran et al., 1990; Dalli, 1997; Powell et al., 2005). Apart from the impact stress has on mothers' own lives, it has implications for families, and the wider society, because mothers' wellbeing also determines their effectiveness as parents (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). According to Butler et al. the overwhelming experiences of becoming a mother and the degree of information required to meet the ever changing demands of the new role, have a heavy influence on personal freedom and feelings of self-confidence. As mothers may be forced into a position of satisfying the needs of their child above their own for a sustained period, this engenders feelings of self doubt and inadequacy so the requirement for support becomes paramount (Butler et al., 2000; Cochran et al. 1990). Bronfenbrenner (2006) cites reasons for support such as: lack of exposure to naturally occurring parenting models due to smaller families, isolation from traditional networks and the lengthy commitment of parenting operating simultaneously with other life events.

Taking these views into account this paper argues that appropriate and focused support is a crucial requirement for mothers during adjustment to the early parenting role. Butler et al. (2000) and Cochran et al. (1990) agree that the event of birth is responsible for the disruption of established networks because the altered lifestyle renders them inadequate in providing pertinent empathy and information. As a consequence new networks are sought that will be more useful for the parenting task.

Parent Involvement in Centres

Early childhood services have been associated with different types of opportunity for parent involvement since their inception (Larner, 1997; May, 1997; Powell, 1998; Powell et al., 2005). Whilst all early childhood services in New Zealand, offer support and learning, the degree to which this occurs is highly variable, as a consequence of their diverse beginnings, philosophy and degree of state responsibility.

> **The playcentre** represents a traditional model that operates entirely on the basis of parent leadership, with parents seeking diplomas in order to provide qualified staff (Powell et al., 2005).

> **The funded playgroup** resembles the playgroup model in the way parents remain throughout sessions. However, typically they are license exempt, unlike early childhood centres, providing they meet the conditions outlined in an official notice in the Education Gazette, 15th February, 1991 (MOE, 2006). Government funding is available as well as trained

expertise when these centres operate under the license of another early childhood group.

The community kindergarten has community origins usually reflecting a high degree of parental participation, however with trained teachers, or staff in-training (White & Woollett, 1993).

The free kindergarten is traditionally a sessional service operating within the New Zealand Kindergarten movement model. Teachers' salaries and conditions are covered under the State Sector Act. Whilst parents have always been welcomed this is within a framework that identifies a division between trained educational staff, and untrained volunteers (May, 1997).

Early childhood centres constitute places where parents can gain important benefits for themselves as well as their children (Cochran et al., 1990; Powell, 1989; Powell et al., 2005; Renwick, 1985; Smith et al., 2000). In addition, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that the real benefit lies in the support being dynamically responsive, rather than static, to mothers' ever changing needs. Mothers are particularly attracted to information through exchanges with other mothers because of its authenticity as personal experiences. Support needs to involve mothers in an active process (Bowman, 1997; Swick, 2004). They must be able to select from a range of different options that promote choice and personal control. The close bond between mother and child means there is no need for the development of separate support programmes for children and parents within centres because their needs are so closely aligned (Dalli, 1997).

Methodology

A qualitative methodology, using a case study approach was chosen as most suited to understanding the dynamics of parent support within early childhood centres (Eisenhardt, 2002).

Sample

Four centres were purposively selected: a playcentre, a funded playgroup, a community kindergarten and a free kindergarten. All four represented sessional service types where mothers are likely to have greatest involvement than full-time services. The playcentre was staffed by parents in training. At the other three centres staff were diploma/degree qualified early childhood teachers.

Three mothers and two staff from each centre participated in the study (a total of 12 mothers and 8 staff). The criteria for selecting mothers was: being a new mother and attending a centre for the first time, not being in paid work or being employed part time, but not full-time.

Data Collection

Staff were interviewed once and mothers were interviewed twice. Interviews were semi structured and probed beliefs about the nature and sources of support and the degree to which it was perceived to operate in the focus centre. Mothers were interviewed immediately after enrolment at their centre, they were also interviewed a second time eight months later. The mothers were also asked to keep a diary and record anything they perceived as supportive during the interim period between interviews. Diaries were intended to capture incidents at the point of time they occurred rather than relying on recall as in the

case of interviews. Being spontaneous they provided a firsthand account and as private records they offered particular insights (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1985). The researcher also made telephone contact during the period to maintain interest. Mothers were asked to bring the diaries to the second interview to aid recall of the nature and sources of support experienced during the eight month period between interviews.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed throughout the collection process, being subjected to a coding method designed by Strauss (1987) that defines three kinds of qualitative data analysis integrated into a single approach, namely: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Initial codes were reviewed and examined and ideas and themes organised in order to identify the axis of key concepts. In the final stage of selective coding, where the investigator looks for significance in and elaboration on the organised themes, the complexity of interrelated concepts were expressed according to Neuman (2003) as propositions or theoretical statements. As a check on face validity, the emerging theory that "support was both a formal as well as an informal feature of centre social systems in the study" was shared separately with parents who met as a group and with a staff group. Both groups confirmed that this view reflected reality as they saw and experienced it.

Results

As a result of iterative processes the emergent theory from the study was expressed as six theoretical propositions that confirmed the usefulness of early childhood centres as contexts of support for mothers. The propositions contributed to two themes as follows:

First theme: Support is contingent upon mothers own activity in building social networks and contributing to the centre community

- Support is contingent upon the active contribution of the mothers themselves.
- Support is conditional upon the development of relationships of trust at different levels within the centre community.
- Effective early childhood communities are responsive to the changing needs of mothers.

Second theme: Mothers' support is both formal and informal

- Staff beliefs about their role as well as the centre structure are major determinants of the degree to which formal support is promoted.
- Formal support involves planned delivery of information including parent education; informal support involves the exchange of everyday incidental information through social networks.
- Lack of power sharing by teachers reduces the effectiveness of centres as communities of learning.

The first theme in the study findings contributed to the idea that: Mothers gained incremental support (a sense of wellbeing, confidence and mastery, both personally as well as in the parenting role) through actively building a network of relationships and making a contribution to the centre community. Mothers demonstrated these active processes in the way selection of and engagement with a centre were socially driven. Further, they

established a wide spectrum of relationships (professional, intimate and casual) each with a different purpose. Mothers also maximised opportunities for gaining pertinent information, related to the particular developmental stage of their child, by affiliating with parents who had enrolled around the same time. A growing confidence was evident as mothers moved from being novices, to experienced members. Centres were most successful in supporting mothers when they provided environments that accommodated mothers' needs to build relationships and make a meaningful contribution through effective socially co-operative practices.

The second three propositions contributed to the theme that: Support was both formal and informal. Mothers were able to access parent education programmes devised by teachers (including parent education seminars and written packages of information) as well as informal support (exchange of the minutiae of everyday life with opportunities for self determination and experiential learning). The integrated nature of informal processes was more responsive to mothers' support requirements for relationship building and contribution than teachers' pre-planned formal educational packages. Mothers gained small scraps of pertinent, "authentic" information (meaning convinced of its value because it had been tested and found to be successful by someone faced with a similar problem) within social learning experiences. Informal support likewise gave mothers opportunities for self determination in trialling and choosing whether to accept or reject and add the information to their growing repertoires of knowledge. Although teachers dismissed the exchange of lay information as effective parent support, they were nevertheless important contributors. This was particularly upon the basis of the common experience of motherhood as well as their training and usually greater life experiences. Teachers adhered to their formal practices through traditional beliefs regarding adult education. Their beliefs remained unmodified because they were never challenged through parent participation in truly collaborative practices.

Discussion

In this study parent support was found to be primarily a function of informal rather than formal systems established by teachers. This is at odds with government policy requirements that staff regard parents as partners (MOE, 1996b). The government's *Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education* (MOE, 2002) has a vision of socially co-operative practices supporting these teacher-parent relationships towards a collective responsibility.

When teachers' relationships with mothers were formal they were characterised by a power differential that was detrimental to support, in contrast to the successful support they generated when functioning informally on the basis of equality. However, this does not mean that the teachers professional status is inevitably a barrier to support processes - it instead seemed to give mothers confidence in teachers' ideas and judgements. The problem was the way teachers used their status by excluding parents from all managerial decision making. As a consequence of low levels of meaningful discussion, teachers did not get to hear parents' perspectives, so they neither understood how they gained support nor to what degree the centre needed to be responsive. Even those parents who achieved committee status were a minority as well as decision making there again being the prerogative of teachers. Grey and Horgan (2003) argued similarly that non-collaborative relationships in many centres amount to 'tokenism', being the result of any attempts to build partnerships without true involvement for parents. Rogoff et al. (2001) cautioned that learning communities do not just arise they are the product of careful collaborative construction.

There were two main reasons underpinning teachers' lack of power sharing. Firstly, professional beliefs (Powell, 1989) towards trained knowledge motivated them to preserve the prerogative of decision making for teachers. At the same time it was a means of social control. Teachers were anxious about dealing with parents and building partnerships, stemming from a lack of trained knowledge regarding adult facilitation, education and support (Konzal, 2000). While the teachers knew about policy requirements for working with parents they were unsure what this entailed and expressed difficulty translating requirements into practice (Cullen, 2003; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Rogoff et al., 2001). At the same time because teachers had traditional attitudes to adult learning they regarded "parent support" as "parent education", treating it as a separate, rather than as an integral part of programmes. They also rationalised that parent disinterest and lack of discernment regarding their attempts and provision for parent education constituted justification for concentrating mainly, or only, on their work with children.

Konzal (2000) also detected a lack of transference of learning principles. Konzal concluded it is not enough to expect that staff can successfully facilitate parents as adults upon the basis of their training to work with young children. Similarly, Middleton and May (1997) believed teachers' sense of being unprepared to engage with parents was directly the result of a lack of training. Shartrand, Kreider and Erikson-Warfield (1994) pointed out that formalised programmes that address how early childhood teachers relate to parents and how systems can operate for providing links with home are non-existent.

Conclusion and Implications

Early childhood centre communities were found to be important sources of ongoing parenting and personal support for mothers. This was identified in the two major themes that emerged from the study that: Support was the result of mothers' own active provision through the establishment of collaborative relationships as well as being the product of both formal and informal social systems. As relationships underpin these systems it is expedient for early childhood centres to focus on ensuring they are collaborative. Socially co-operative management will not only promote effective support systems for parents but establish them as a mutually beneficial resource for the entire early childhood community.

Te Whaariki was important for the present study in that teachers were required to consider staff-parent interactions as partnerships (MOE, 1996a). Since then further policy documents have been released that emphasise the importance of including parents: *The Quality Journey: He Haeranga Whai Hua* (MOE, 2000) and *Pathways to the Future* (MOE, 2002). However, in terms of parent inclusion and more particularly support for parents, policy has led teachers to view mothers' and children's needs separately. Partnerships (that teachers have in any case found difficult to implement) are conceived as affiliations between teachers and mothers as adults directed towards outcomes for children as recipients, with support for mothers constituting a separate programme. As expectations were shown in the study to be potent deciders of action, policy needs to be directed towards teachers having an expanded vision of partnerships for the importance it holds for mothers personally as well as benefiting their child. Dalli (2002) likewise advocated dual integrated support, as not only effective because the interconnectedness of the relationship avoids one aspect of support suffering at the expense of the other, but also because it dispenses with the need for separate programmes. It seems that teachers need training to have better insights into parents' needs and support to be able to work with parents confidently and collaboratively (Draper & Duffy, 2006). The teachers' familiarity with policy requirements was not enough, alone, for teachers to translate what they should be doing into practice. Teachers need support to change attitudes and help to establish effective partnerships with parents. These issues for

teachers should be addressed in initial teacher education, through in-service courses and by means of professional development within centres.

As a qualitative study the focus was upon obtaining in-depth understanding of specific social support operations. Whilst the findings were commensurate with a larger body of evidence in the research literature they can be generalised to other settings and contexts because of the small sample size. The findings suggest a need for further investigation into support opportunities in the diverse service types that were outside the scope of the present research. In the current study participants were drawn from sessional services, inferring *time* spent there was important in terms of maximum exposure to support. Further research may highlight, or not, that self determination in a chosen area evokes far more effective support than any temporal consideration. Such findings could be important for mothers who use an early childhood service for longer hours of childcare, as services that provide longer hours usually have parents who spend less time at them.

As support was found to be contingent upon collaborative relationships, further research that identifies ways of initiating and maintaining such relationships within early childhood networks would be opportune. On the basis of teachers' authority largely determining these processes in centres it is recommended that they receive training and professional development support for the purpose. However, policy making in this regard needs to be preceded by research into the nature of the content of any future training and support. This is particularly challenging, as whilst teachers need firm guidelines, inferences are that prescriptive measures to standardise operations would not be appropriate. The uniqueness of naturally occurring networks needs to be preserved for the effective mutual support of mothers, families and their community.

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