AJEC

Vol. 30 – No. 2 June 2005

Controversy, innovation and other alternatives

In this issue

- Questioning 'Child Development'
- Child normalisation and deviancy
- Sexuality in early childhood
- Challenging taken-for-granted discourses
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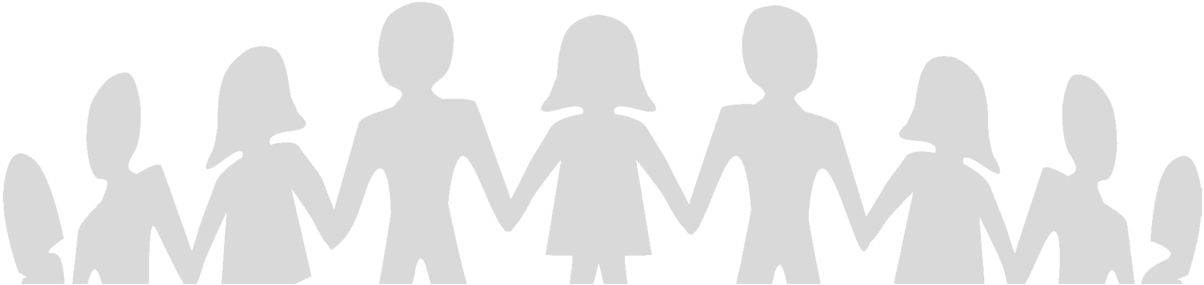

AJEC

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Controversy, innovation and other alternatives

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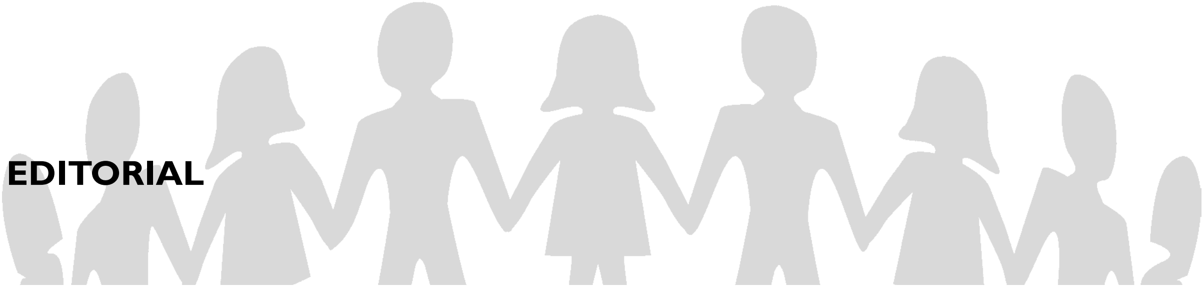

EDITORIAL

This edition of the *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* (AJEC) hopes to be more than a read and think. In this edition we are hoping that you will read, think and respond. The early childhood professional community is spread far and wide and it is difficult to sustain scholarly debate at times. The intent of the AJEC Committee is to use AJEC as a tool for dissemination of such debate. To get this idea started, we have included thought-provoking articles as always but to some we have added a response, or hope that you will respond to begin the scholarly debate. Your response can be in the form of letters to the editor or as a formal response to articles, such as that included in this edition.

Fleer begins this debate by questioning the accepted Western notion of child development. A notion that she believes has become a 'static monocultural view of the world' where 'age and stage' are normalised. She argues that early childhood professionals need to adopt a cultural–historical lens which views child development as dynamic and framed within the context of cultural practices. Fleer calls for 'the removing of fossilised foundations of child development'. Such a call challenges the bedrock of early childhood practice and the reconceptualisation of many preservice tertiary courses.

Understanding behaviour that differs from the norm has always been a challenge—not only for the field of education. The article by Grebennikov proffers the views of Montessori and Standing as a basis for his discussion regarding the construct of the 'normalised child'. Grebennikov describes causes of deviant behaviours and gives ideas regarding how teachers can cater for deviant behaviours. In response to Grebennikov (and to begin the in-press scholarly debate), Chisnall offers a different view to the 'normalised' child.

Sexuality is an invisible topic in early childhood; in fact it has perhaps long been shunned. Robinson challenges early childhood educators to cast a critical lens on the way gender has been constructed in early childhood. Gender and sexuality, she argues, have been inextricably tied to the normalised practices of the dominant discourse of heterosexuality. Queer theory, Robinson suggests, is a way in which we can critically unpack this discourse.

When are QIAS satisfactory standards not satisfactory at all? When they lead to young children displaying high levels of stress. Sims, Guilfoyle and Parry discuss the latest results of their study of children's cortisol levels in long day care centres. They call for systematic changes to services so they can deliver quality services for young children.

Sumsion, in her article, suggests the profession takes a different tack when talking about the issues that plague the Australian long day care services. She describes a different discourse, one that 'disrupts habitual ways of thinking' by using a discourse of opportunity and critical professionalism.

Successful partnerships between staff and parents are a key indicator of the quality of the service provision. Elliot describes a study that developed a model for effective communication between parents and staff. This model, the 'communication accretion spiral', offers practitioners a shared basis for beginning purposeful dialogues with families.

The articles in this edition ask us to challenge long-held beliefs, or to view ideas or practices through different lenses. In short, such thinking dares us as a profession to do things differently. However, any dare needs to be considered before action is taken, and the first step must be scholarly debate.

Lennie Barblett
Edith Cowan University
AJEC Committee

The AJEC Committee invites readers' thoughts on the matters raised within the journal. Letters to the editor, enquiries, comments, submissions and contributions can be sent to publishing@earlychildhood.org.au

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Topic: Editorial in AJEC Vol. 30 No. 1

I wanted to support the committee's comments in the editorial of the previous AJEC. AJEC is an important voice for early childhood in Australia as well as being read in New Zealand, the UK and the US.

AJEC is a unique voice and only one of two that really gives a voice to Australian early childhood research. I know early childhood researchers publish in a myriad of places but a targeted publication gets a more informed audience that raises the value of the material under discussion.

The idea of incorporating articles that give a voice to different methodologies and perspectives is one I support. Form and structure has tended to dominate research in recent years, so a move to balance this is highly commendable.

On the internationalisation issue I can say that I would welcome such a move. If the committee revisits some of the early years of the journal there was a strong international flavour. It is surprising that this disappeared so quietly, though perhaps this happened when OMEP became less strongly associated with the editorship of the journal. In a globalising world it is essential to broaden our own perspective.

This letter is therefore a statement of support for the committee's two goals for the journal: the inclusion of a wider range of voices, and an international voice.

Berenice Nyland
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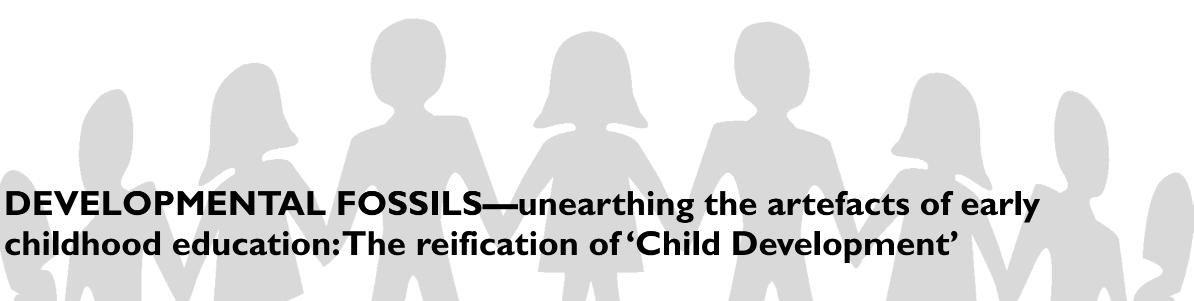

DEVELOPMENTAL FOSSILS—unearthing the artefacts of early childhood education: The reification of 'Child Development'

Marilyn Fleer
Monash University

In recent years sociocultural theory has provided an important conceptual tool for re-thinking many practices in early childhood education (e.g. Anning, Cullen & Fleer, 2004; Edwards, 2001; Edwards, 2003). While much has been gained, many taken-for-granted practices still remain in need of critique. Although the term 'Child Development' has been debated in the past (see collection of papers in Fleer, 1995; Keesing-Styles & Hedges, in press; Lubeck, 1996; 1998), we have not seen the emergence of a new approach or world view to replace it. Ten years have passed, and we still find national materials which foreground Western middle-class notions of development (e.g. Responses to the National Agenda for Early Childhood, Australian Government, 2003). This paper seeks to stimulate debate within Australia and New Zealand around the term 'Child Development'. Responses are invited so that the historical and cultural legacy of that term can be examined and a new term introduced which recognises our culturally and linguistically diverse communities. It is through public debate that we can as a scholarly community build new terminology to name and make visible new thinking.

Introduction

Contemporary early childhood education in many English-speaking countries foregrounds the importance of educators' 'Child Development' knowledge. In particular, most Australian students and graduates of early childhood education programs would have focused at some stage on children's ages and the expected 'developmental milestones'. This knowledge is fundamental to the professional knowledge needed for early childhood educators to work effectively in the field. This knowledge shapes the thinking about what is the expected development of children from birth to eight years. However, consider the following two quotations:

> *Once [Polynesian] babies could walk, mothers released them into the care of 3- to 4-year-old siblings, who played nearby, checking periodically on the young ones* (Rogoff, 2003, p.123, drawing upon Martini and Kirkpatrick, 1992).
>
> *In contrast to the preferred age of 7 to 10 years for child caregivers in many countries, middle-class European American families seldom use baby-sitters younger than 12 years old* (Rogoff, 2003, p. 123).

The first quotation sits outside of the linear developmental pattern characteristic of health and education developmental charts and quality assurance documents in Australia (Fleer & Kennedy, 2001). The latter sits more comfortably within what would be expected behaviour based upon general 'Child Development' knowledge. These two quotations draw our attention to the need to not just think about diversity across cultural communities but also reconsider the basis upon which we as professionals make judgements. Expectations which have been normed against particular cultural communities may not reflect the diversity of cultural groups which make up our culturally and linguistically diverse Australian community.

In drawing upon sociocultural theory and socio-historical research we seek to problematise the term 'Child Development'. General sociocultural (Anning, Cullen & Fleer, 2004) and postmodern (see Alloway, 1999; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; MacNaughton, 1995) critiques of early childhood education have helped to illuminate the assumptions underpinning many practices. In light of this, we also believe it is important to provide a concrete way forward in thinking about development. Although it is not the intention of this paper to 'do away' with development, it is our professional responsibility to find possible directions to move the field forward. As such, we invite responses to this paper and hope that a fruitful dialogue can be entered into within the *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* (AJEC).

Development

> *There is a conception of education which professes to be based upon the idea of development. But it takes back with one hand what it proffers with the other. Development is conceived not as continuous growing, but as the unfolding of latent powers toward a definite goal. The goal is conceived of as completion, perfection. Life at any stage short of attainment of this goal is merely an unfolding toward it* (Dewey, 1916, p. 56).

The legacy of a traditional view on development, as outlined above by Dewey back in 1916, is still commonplace within the field of early childhood education. Just as Dewey had been critical, Vygotsky was similarly critical of this view of development for the mind:

> *… an enormous mosaic of mental life development comprised of separate piece of experience, a grandiose atomistic picture of the dismembered human mind* (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 4).

What both scholars have in common is a social orientation to development and to learning. Both put forward different ways of thinking about development:

> *… the educational process is one of continual reorganising, reconstructing, transforming* (Dewey, 1916, p. 50).
>
> *… Vygotsky posed internalization of interpersonal processes as being the substrate of development* (Glick, 1997, p. xi)

Vygotsky argued that, in the development of the child, two types of mental development are represented (not repeated). These are biological and historical, or natural and cultural development of behaviour. He suggested that:

> *… culture creates special forms of behavior, it modifies the activity of mental functions, it constructs new superstructures in the developing system of human behavior. This is a basic fact confirmed for us by every page of the psychology of primitive man [sic], which studies cultural-psychological development in its pure, isolated form. In the process of historical development, social man changes the methods and devices of his behavior, transforms natural instincts and functions, and develops and creates new forms of behavior – specifically cultural* (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 18).

Vygotsky stated that to 'study history is not to study the past. To study something historically means to study it in motion.' (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 43). Rogoff (2003) has also suggested a more dynamic view of development. In her most recent book on the cultural nature of development, Rogoff (2003) has argued that cultural communities cannot be viewed as a static social address, but that the reciprocity of individuals, community culture and context enact upon each other informing and transforming over time (intergenerationally). Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) suggest that a 'cultural–historical approach can help researchers and practitioners characterize the commonalities of experience of people who share cultural background, without "locating" the commonalities within individuals' (p. 21). They state:

> *We argue that people live culture in a mutually constitutive manner in which it is not fruitful to tote up their characteristics as if they occur independently of culture, and of culture as if it occurs independently of people* (p. 21)

Vygotsky argued that traditional approaches to psychological research focused on studying elements—such as walking or talking. However, the perspective that Vygotsky introduced 'is based on understanding child development as a dialectical unit of two essentially different orders, and it sees the basic problem of research to be a thorough study of the one order and the other and a study of the laws of their merging at each age level' (Vygtosky, 1997, p. 22).

> *Research that understands development of higher mental functions in this way always tries to comprehend this process as part of a more complex and broad whole, in connecting with biological development of behavior, against a background of an interlacing of both processes* (Vygtosky, 1997, p. 22).

Vygotsky (1997) also argued that in these relations, where higher levels of psychological functioning are developing (inter to intra), social beings actively select those dimensions that interest them, and which they have been socially primed to notice and want to understand. Vygotsky foregrounded the importance of a 'whole social context' (as opposed to introducing fragmented and isolated skills or concepts) in which imitation is of great importance. However, Vygotsky had a technical definition of imitation in mind when he introduced this concept (see Chaiklin, 2003, p. 52). As Vygotsky states, we must 'reject the opinion that reduces the essence of imitation to the simple formation of habits and to recognize imitation as a substantial factor in the development of higher forms of human behaviour' (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 96). Vygotsky argued that an individual can imitate only when she or he has developed some understandings. That is, 'imitation is possible only to the extent and in those forms in which it is accompanied by understanding' (p. 96). With this orientation to cultural development in mind, the importance of the social whole and the dialectical relationship between biological and historical (subjective and objective as elaborated by Chaiklin, 2003) become evident.

> *In contrast to theories of development that focus on the individual and the social or cultural context as separate entities (adding or multiplying one and the other), the cultural–historical approach assumes that individual development must be understood in, and cannot be separated from, its social and cultural–historical context. According to Vygotsky's theory, the efforts of individuals are not separate from the kinds of activities in which they engage and the kinds of institutions of which they are a part* (Rogoff, 2003, p. 50).

Gaskins (1999) suggests that to understand development we should examine neither individual children nor institutional structures, nor even cultural belief systems, but rather observe the dynamic processes of children engaged in daily activity with other people (Gaskins, 1999). The interlacing, rather than the displacement or separate study of all these dimensions, constituted Vygotsky's concept of the cultural–historical development of children (Vygotsky, 1997).

In fields such as early childhood education, where views of development (individual, stage oriented) were influential in laying the foundations and for shaping the nature of the profession, considering a new orientation to development means removing the fossilised foundations. Calls for this unearthing have also come from the cross-cultural literature (Woodhead, Faulkner & Littleton, 1998). Some of this research is briefly examined in the following section.

Problematising universal views of development: Evidence from cross-cultural research

Schieffelin and Ochs (1998) have stated:

> *The extent to which we are developing culturally specific theories of development needs to be considered* (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1998, p. 61).

Woodhead, Faulkner and Littleton (1998) suggest:

> *Developing emotional attachments, learning language and acquiring reasoning skills may be universal, but that doesn't make these human activities any less cultural, in so far as they take place within culturally regulated social relationships, and are mediated by cultural practices. These practices are in turn shaped by knowledge and beliefs about what is normal and desirable, including the knowledge offered by developmental psychology* (Woodhead, Faulkner & Littleton, 1998, p. 2).

Cross-cultural research provides us with a broader understanding of beliefs surrounding expectations in children's development. For example, in some parts of West Africa the principle underpinning child development is social rather than biological, as noted by Nsamenang and Lamb (1998) in their study of Nso children in the Bamenda Granfields of Cameroon, West Africa (211 men and 178 women who were parents or grandparents of children under the age of 10 years):

> *… children are progressively assigned different roles at different life stages depending on their perceived level of social competence rather than on their biological maturation* (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1998, p. 252).

In many other industrialised nations, the age of children underpins the way preschool, child care and schools are organised. Rogoff (2003) states that it was not until the late 1800s that age became a criterion for ordering lives:

> *With the rise of industrialization and efforts to systemize human services such as education and medial care, age became a measure of development and a criterion for sorting people. Specialized institutions were designed around age groups. Developmental psychology and pediatrics began at this time, along with old-age institutions and age-graded schools* (p. 8).

In most English-speaking countries today, children are usually placed into groups based on their age. Rogoff (2003) states that, before specialised institutions were designed around age groups:

> *… people rarely knew their age, and students advanced in their education as they learned. Both expert and popular writing in the United States rarely referred to specific ages … Over the past century and a half, the concept of age and associated practices relying on age-grading have come to play a central,* though often unnoticed role *in ordering lives in some cultural communities …* (p. 8; my emphasis).

She also suggests that:

> *Children's groups around the world generally include a mix of ages … Grouping children by age is unusual around the world. It requires adequate numbers of children in a small territory to ensure availability of*

> *several children of the same age (Konner, 1975). It also seems to be prompted by the growth of bureaucracies and reductions in family size* (Rogoff, 2003, p. 125).

Clearly then, 'Child Development' in the context of early childhood education, as presently conceptualised and enacted in English-speaking countries, has become a taken-for-granted cultural practice based on ages and stages which has been normalised. This particular cultural belief about children is relevant for children from European or North American backgrounds (given this is the research base used) from a time in which industrialisation was an important cultural practice. However, the legacy of this cultural belief and assumption about how children develop in contemporary society is in need of review. Rogoff (1990; 1998; 2003) has argued that *'development can be understood only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities – which also change'* (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 3-4, original emphasis). In essence, culture not only determines the principles for defining development, but frames the contexts in which the development of children is supported. Woodhead, Faulkner and Littleton (1998) have also foregrounded the cultural nature of development:

> *'Child Development' is itself culturally constructed. As a body of theoretical knowledge and research descriptions, Child Development reflects a minority of world childhoods, based mainly on North American and European children as studied from the perspective of North American and European researchers* (Woodhead, Faulkner & Littleton, 1998, p. 1).

Hedegaard (2004) argues that children develop through participating in everyday activities in societal institutions. Development is viewed by Hedegaard (2004) as the relationship between the child and society. Development is not something that exists within the child, but rather takes place as the child interacts with her/his cultural community. She argues that when development does not proceed it is not the fault of the child, but rather of the relationship between the child and society. As such, the problem lies not in the child, but in the institution. When cultural diversity exists within a particular community, Hedegaard's (2004) assertion is particularly important. Assuming universal views on 'Child Development' positions some children from some families in deficit (Fleer & Robbins, 2004). As suggested by Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry & Göncü (1998) we need to begin to understand 'the development of children in the context of their own communities', and this requires the 'study of the local goals and means of approaching life' (Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry & Göncü, 1998, p. 228):

> *… the sociohistorical approach assumes that individual development must be understood in (and cannot be separated from) the social context* (Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry & Göncü, 1998, p. 227).

How our educational institutions take account of cultural variations and children's community experiences has generally not been foregrounded in early childhood beliefs and practices around development. Rather, expectations of children during the early childhood years are generally viewed with Western middle-class lenses, and culture is 'added on' to this trajectory of development as an anomaly—not quite fitting. This is clearly evident in the profession's responses to the recently published National Agenda for Early Childhood (Australian Government, 2003), where Developmentally Appropriate Practices (see Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) are foregrounded. Culturally and linguistically diverse communities are given a separate section, without a critique of whose development is considered as the default in the main body of the document. As suggested by Gutierrez and Rogoff (2002):

> *Scholars from a wide range of disciplines have called attention to the problem of 'essentializing' people on the basis of a group label and have underlined the variability that exists within groups and practices. Scholars examining cultural styles have agreed for a more situated and dynamic view of the cultural practices of ethnic and racial groups (Banks, 1995; Gay, 1995; 2000; Irvine & York, 1995; Nieto, 1999)* (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2002, p. 20).

Conclusion: From 'Child Development' to 'Cultural–Historical Development of Children'

Problematising the notion of 'Child Development' across and within groups highlights the complexity of capturing the dynamic and transformative characteristics of children, culture and early childhood institutions. As Gutierrez and Rogoff (2002) remind us:

> *… with cultural–historical approaches, there has not yet been sufficient attention to figuring out how to talk and think about regularities across individuals' or cultural communities' ways of doing things* (p. 21).

What we do know is that the term 'Child Development' as used within the field of early childhood education in Australia is found wanting, since we should not '… give too much weight to specific age expectations because the age at which children begin to contribute to specific activities is strongly related to the sort of supports and constraints offered by their community' (Rogoff, 2003, p. 17). Analyses of cultural communities by Rogoff (2003) (both as reviews of the literature, and her own research) have shown 'impressive variations' in what is expected and what is done at very different ages across communities. She argues:

> *The ages of accomplishment are highly related to the opportunities children have to observe and participate in the activities and cultural values regarding development of particular skills* (Rogoff, 2003, p. 170).

We can argue that the term 'Child Development' in Australia has been reified (Wenger, 1998) and now represents a static and monocultural view of children, notably Western middle-class children and their families. We would suggest that the term *'Cultural–Historical Development of Children'* more closely captures the dynamic and complex nature of the interlacing (Vygotsky, 1997) of institutional structures, cultural belief systems, and the dynamic processes of children engaged in daily activity with other people (Gaskins, 1999). Taken together, a sociocultural perspective foregrounds the *Cultural–Historical Development of Children* (for further discussion on this see Fleer & Farquhar, in press). This new world view suggests that development should not be located within the individual; should be viewed intergenerationally; should be thought of as part of lived everyday experience in which children are socially primed to engage; and should be dialectical in nature. *The Cultural–Historical Development of Children* is a dynamic construct supporting a new world view for early childhood education.

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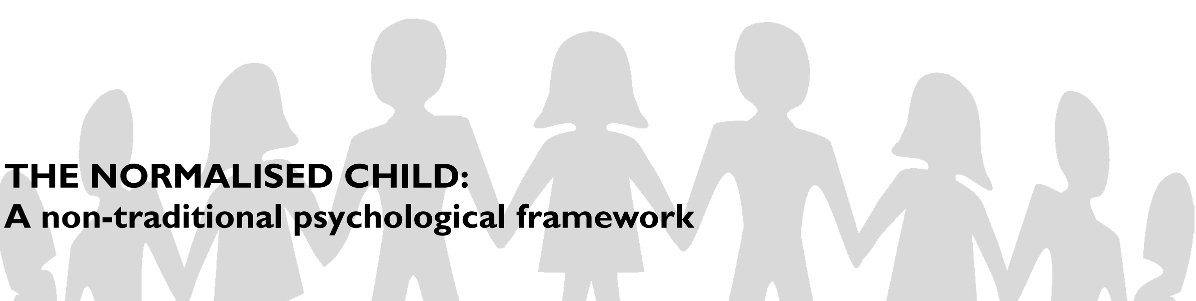

THE NORMALISED CHILD:
A non-traditional psychological framework

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The terms 'normalisation' and 'normalised child' were introduced into early childhood scholarship by Maria Montessori, whose ideas regarding norm and deviation in children's development and behaviour have been discussed, debated and sometimes criticised, but remain magnetic and recognised worldwide. Contemporary Western society is witnessing a major expansion of early childhood services. This is an answer both to the increased need for non-familial care for children of working parents and to the perception that high-quality early childhood educational background will enhance children's life chances. As this provision expands, there is also increasing awareness of issues that early childhood workers have difficulty responding to, such as problems of some students' maladjustment, misconduct, or challenging behaviour. This essay argues that the approach towards normalisation advocated by Maria Montessori and further developed by Edwin Mortimer Standing, presented in a psychological science context, has much to offer in attempts to find a response to these issues.

Approaches to defining norm and deviance

Sociology offers a general concept of deviance as any pattern of behaviour that is markedly different from the accepted standards within a society. The connotation is that moral or ethical issues are involved (e.g., Aggleton, 1987; Calhoun, 2004; Johnson, 2000; Marshall, 2003). Logically, the question arises as to what these standards are. According to Aggleton (1987), all answers to this question can be classified under two headings: absolute and relative. The 'absolute' approach affirms the existence of fundamental, universal expectations about human behaviour and, accordingly, misbehaviour (like—some would say—the Ten Commandments or seven deadly sins). However, 'recognising that norms vary from society to society, and from time to time in history, has created major problems for an absolute approach to deviance' (Aggleton, 1987, p. 4). The 'relative' approach carefully identifies the conditions against which particular actions are to be judged. Thus, the relative norm and deviance are associated with the statistical majority and minority of reactions to some regular stimulus situations within a definite place, time and social context. This approach is also of limited value, since many patterns of irreproachable behaviour have to be classified as deviant minority, such as always observing the traffic regulations or never dropping litter in the street.

Both Montessori and Standing were predisposed to the first, absolute approach when they described a number of characteristics of normality and deviance in children as universal (Montessori, 1972; Standing, 1962a; 1962b). Their concept of norm rests upon the species program of development that changes in time extremely slowly and may, in practical terms, be assumed as invariable. One's normal behaviour is formed through successful evolution of this program. Deviations occur when a natural way of development is violated, and they can be remedied by redirecting an individual back on an optimal developmental track. The program of development evolves in the best way through one's free interaction with an environment full of relevant stimuli—an opportunity not many children had enjoyed by the beginning of the twentieth century. This may explain why some patterns of children's behaviour Montessori and Standing described as deviant, such as untidiness, possessiveness, refuge in fantasies, or extreme attachment to someone (Montessori, 1972, pp. 158-163; Standing, 1962b, p. 91) most people would consider normal. Likewise a few 'characteristics of the normalised child', postulated by these two scholars, such as love of order, love of silence and working alone, or spontaneous self-discipline (Standing, 1962a, pp. 175-178; 1962b, p. 90) did not represent the statistical majority. Still their ideas contained enough truth to find support in contemporary psychological and neuroscientific research and educational practices (e.g., Balson, 1992; 1994; Carr, 1992; Farran, 2001; Hetherington & Parke, 1987; Kaiser & Raminsky, 1999; Nelson, 1999; Plutchik, 1980; Siegel, 1999; 2001; Wolf &

Gardner, 1979; 1981). For example, Balson (1992, pp. 45-48) states:

> *Maladjustment or misbehaviour is the individual's misdirected goal. If their efforts to learn, belong, co-operate, and participate at home or at school are rejected or discouraged, children begin to feel that they are not good enough, that they cannot belong through useful or constructive behaviours. The only reason children need to disturb is because they fear defeat on the useful site and … turn to disturbing ways of behaviour in their attempt to salvage some semblance of worth and significance.*

Ability to learn from experience is a genetically-programmed function of the brain (Meade, 2001; Nelson, 1999; Plutchik, 1980; 1995; Siegel, 1999; 2001). How and when this ability becomes limited or expanded, embracing or selective is determined by genes. Researchers are confident that both amount and quality of incoming experience can affect the further implementation of the genetic program itself. Siegel (1999, p. 14) says:

> *Genes contain the information for the general organisation of the brain's structure, but experience determines which genes become expressed, how and when. The expression of genes leads to the production of proteins that enable neuronal growth and the formation of new synapses.*

Analysing how the interaction of the brain and experience affects the individual behaviour and development, Nelson (1999, pp. 42-44) concludes:

> *It is the ability of the brain to be shaped by experience and, in turn, for this newly remolded brain to facilitate the embrace of new experiences, which leads to further neural changes, ad infinitum. Experience is responsible for the changes that occur in the brain, which in turn determines the behavioral profile and development of the organism. Such changes can be both adaptive and maladaptive for the organism. Without normative experiences normal development goes awry. By understanding precisely how the brain is modified by experience, we can better identify the experiences needed to bring children back on a normal developmental trajectory, or prevent them from moving off this trajectory.*

Explanations of deviant behaviour

The major perspectives in explanation of deviance are those which see the origins of deviant behaviour within the individual, and those which see them outside the person, in society. There are also eclectic approaches (Aggleton, 1987; Calhoun, 2004; Hetherington & Parke, 1987; Johnson, 2000; Kaiser & Raminsky, 1999; Marshall, 2003). As examples of hypotheses belonging to the first of these viewpoints we can refer to biological and physiological explanations of deviance. In the cruder biological theories, 'the presence of particular anatomical characteristics such as large ears, high cheekbones, extra fingers and so on, have been associated with tendencies towards deviance. More sophisticated explanations included the presence or absence of certain chromosomes, the existence of particular hormonal disturbances and the overall level of physiological arousal within a person' (Aggleton, 1987, p. 12). The general idea of this approach is that an individual's biological constitution is likely to determine their ability to learn from past experience and hence to influence their social adjustment. The most recent example is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which is believed to arise 'as a developmental failure in the brain circuitry that underlies inhibition and self-control, because of an altered gene or genes' (Barkley, 1998, p. 44). Numerous guides assure parents that ADHD is a hereditary disease, and is not caused by poor parenting or a disordered environment (e.g. Barkley, 1995; Weingartner, 1999). At the same time, anecdotal evidence (including the author's teaching experience) and some research (Hetherington & Parke, 1987; Kaiser & Raminsky, 1999) suggests that chaotic or stressful environment can aggravate the ADHD symptoms, whereas a well-structured classroom usually alleviates them.

Undoubtedly today's advances in psychoneurology and genetics explain some cases of maladjusted behaviour, though not all of them. The functionalist accounts of deviance can complete the picture. In a broad sense they refer to individuals who are assumed to be born without any physical or mental pathology and develop deviations through some unfortunate surroundings. This approach argues that deviant behaviour is functional for both a society and people involved. It helps a society to establish and re-establish the boundaries between right and wrong, and enhances social solidarity against a common threat. And for maladjusted individuals it can be a form of adaptation (Aggleton, 1987; Balson, 1992, 1994; Calhoun, 2004; Johnson, 2000; Marshall, 2003). As educationalists, Montessori and Standing were primarily concerned about deviations that had arisen through mistreatment in infancy and could be cured by pedagogical means, that is without medical intervention. Unsurprisingly, their insights into the issue tunes in to the functionalists' explanation of how one's natural need to adjust can lead to the opposite result.

In any species a newborn creature has a genetic program of development worked out in the process of evolutionary adaptation to the mainstream surroundings. However, a specific environment, for instance a parental home, can vary considerably from that average standard. More illustrative, though rarer, examples of atypical surroundings in relation to the extended social context are close or isolated communities, religious sects, and the like. Adaptation to atypical environments produces patterns of behaviour regarded as deviant within the mainstream. Yet social disapproval can be of no matter to a person, since their perception and attitudes are influenced by neurologically-organised defence mechanisms. They are unconscious cognitive techniques used (and originally developed) to protect the positive self-concept from disruptions. Fear, anxiety, and their social derivatives such as shame, guilt, or remorse signal the brain that something in reality disagrees with one's positive self-image and requires physical or mental amendments. The latter are achieved through the use of defences. They start to form in the brain by the age of 2-2.5, when certain elements of the limbic system inducing emotions install feedback connections with the perceptual units in the neocortex, which consequently can change their functional activity in case of emotional conflict. Hence, the evaluation of repeatedly frustrating events becomes inaccurate, which affects the behaviour. (Kostandov, 1983; 1985; Plutchik, Kellerman & Conte, 1979; Romanova & Grebennikov, 1996). Plutchik et al. (1979, p. 252) state this concisely:

> *In the process of growing up, each individual faces a large variety of situations that trigger emotional states such as anger, fear, disgust, resentment, or sadness. Quite often, the expression of the emotional state creates a further conflict and additional danger. For example, attacking a larger, older person can lead to destructive retaliation; criticizing one's parents can lead to hostile rebukes or threats of loss. The result is that the child develops defensive strategies that represent unconscious, indirect ways of dealing with emotional conflicts.*

Too much frustration in one's infancy and early childhood makes these strategies especially limited, rigid, and often overused. As a result, some people can perceive any criticism as nothing but a confirmation of them being right, smart, attractive—and of the critics being jealous, malicious or stupid. Others tend to be aggressive, provocative or cynical. They perceive the world as a hostile hierarchical structure and always need to find scapegoats to whom their anger can be safely directed. The community responds accordingly, which forms a vicious circle. This way the confrontation with the society can become someone's mode of social adaptation.

Similarly, Standing and Montessori explain deviations through the concept of 'general characteristics of growth' (Standing, 1962a, p. 148) or the 'laws of man's inner development' (Montessori, 1914, pp. 129, 131-134). With the terminology updated slightly by the author, these postulates read: (1) every organism develops according to a genetically-programmed pattern; (2) the development proceeds at the expense of the environmental resources utilised by a process of selective activity in the organism; (3) some external matters and life experiences are assimilated, becoming one with the organism, developing it physically and mentally; and (4) the development, both physical and mental, is based on non-stop input and output of energy. If an environment does not provide enough resources, living beings degenerate or die. If the inner energy has not a predestined way out, it either starts to destroy the organism or produces deviations. The energy does not have a natural way out when something is wrong in the environment. When it lacks the right stimuli or stimulus events in the right time, or prevents the reactions, then an organism starts searching for more or less appropriate substitutes. For example, if a child is deprived of adult's responsiveness in the time she or he vitally needs it, this child can soon discover ways of attention-seeking behaviour, such as being capricious, aggressive or feigning illness. The attention they get will not be as positive as was wanted. It will be a substitute; all the same, the behavioural pattern may become fixed in the character.

Standing postulates the main factors which may 'block the stream of energy' and cause deviations (Standing, 1962a, p. 150; 1962b, p. 87). They are: (1) when the child has the will to act but his movements are inhibited; (2) when the will of the adult is substituted for that of the child; and (3) when children are abandoned to their own devices or, in other words, the environment does not provide relevant activities. These three factors can be linked to such parental attitudes as emotional rejection and emotional symbiosis. Emotional rejection can be primary and secondary. Primary rejection may occur when the child is unplanned, unwanted, or supposed to solve some family problem. Secondary rejection can result from the newborn child's gender, appearance, likeness or unlikeness with someone, or from post-birth instability in the family. Right after birth, emotional rejection can be revealed through the mother's insufficient or inadequate responsiveness to the child's physical and emotional needs. Then two ways of parental practices are possible. If the rejection of the child is realised by the parents, they will likely come to hypo-protective parenting. This is understood as lack of guardianship, abandonment, virtual disinterest in the child's development and wellbeing, and agrees with Standing's third factor (cf. Standing, 1962a; 1962b). Sometimes quite formal care can be manifested, but the principle attitude remains the same: the adult(s) do not conceal their indifference to the child, either from the community or from themselves.

Sometimes parents reject their child unconsciously. They mentally block the realisation of the fact, because they cannot stand thinking of themselves and appearing to the community as 'bad parents' (Romanova & Grebennikov, 1996). So they do their best to show the opposite: exaggerating parental care and concern. The rejection of the child, though repressed, still influences their tactics and attitude, and finally it all shapes up in an authoritarian parenting style with an excess of control, demands and criticism. This is consistent with Standing's second factor (cf. Standing, 1962a; 1962b). In either case, emotional rejection frustrates one of the infant's basic needs: seeing the world as a place that is safe, dependable, responsive and caring. The child is forced to adapt to this situation through developing and extensively using defence mechanisms. Their specific set can be also determined by the extent to which an individual is extraverted or introverted. Let us use these slightly old-fashioned terms for biologically-based differences in arousal, reactivity and self-regulation. Depending on them, some people will likely develop defences implying externalised, motoric expression of an impulse, while others will work out control and non-motoric transformation of an impulse.

Table 1 illustrates the ideas that are being discussed. It schematises the relations between mistreatments in infancy, in combination with biological factors and some common conduct or personality problems. Obviously there are many variables or vicissitudes in reality which can interfere in this scheme. The child may experience different attitudes from different family members—besides, there are cultural, social, reference group influences and so on. It should also be mentioned that people exhibit aspects of both—extraversion and introversion—and may increase behaviours reflecting one pole without necessarily diminishing behaviours reflecting the other. To abstract from these variables, I included in the table a line called Existential Problems. These are the problems of adaptation that acquire extreme acuteness as a result of specific long-lasting frustrations in infancy and early childhood. Eventually, stimulus events more or less similar to those that originally aroused the frustration start to provoke the same—unwanted—emotional conflict. In dealing with it, an individual can be lucky to come across socially acceptable patterns of coping behaviour, or can be

Table 1. Parental practices and biological make-up as determinants of deviations

Emotional Attitudes	Rejection		Symbiosis
Parenting Styles	Abandonment	Authoritarianism	Over-protection
Existential Problems	Trust	Hierarchy	Territoriality
	Acceptance	Power	Efficiency
	Self-Acceptance	Submission	Control
Extraversion: Conduct Problems	Histrionic	← Aggressive →	Regressive
	Fantastic Lying	Destructive	Restless
	Illness Feigning	Swearing	Temper Tantrums
	Asocial	Stealing	Whims
	Untidy	Forgetful	Refuge in Fantasies
Introversion: Personality Problems	Withdrawn	Lethargic	Overdependent
	Suspicious	Fearful	Possessive
	Passive Negativism	Submissive	Irresolute

unlucky and develop deviations. Hence, by origin, a deviation is an inadequate and mainly unconscious way to deal with a mainly unconscious, pressing problem. As soon as the problem is identified, a constructive solution can be found.

For example, a histrionic person has a recurrent need to substitute for lack of love, acceptance and, consequently, self-acceptance (Plutchik, 1995). The method they use is to get attention by all means. They actually take attention for acceptance and interpret their social problems as benign, trivial, or even desirable. The function of this strategy, which is called denial, is to maintain the feeling of being liked or loved. In class such students can play out roles of 'clowns' or 'princesses', or provoke and annoy their teachers and classmates. They will inevitably disturb others, as they need spectators and response, no matter whether it is resentment, laughter or imitation. The best the teacher can do is to identify the goal as attention-seeking and 'act in such a way that student does not receive attention for the particular behaviour' (Balson, 1992, p. 91). Ignore that behaviour, even if you have to put an end to it, keep detached, cold, and unemotional. In contrast, if such a student succeeds in learning something new, puts time and effort into a fair piece of work, or just has been cooperative and nice to others, teacher's notice can be a must. While deviant attention-seeking patterns—including playing out roles, fantastic lying, aggression and simulation—are not immediately obvious consequences of abandonment, others such as poor socialisation and lack of order are straightforward results of it. They are not modified by temperamental factors.

Another type of abandoned child is characterised by mistrust, negativism and isolation. The defence strategy they use is called projection. It is designed to deal with the feeling of self-rejection. Some children sense abandonment as if something is wrong with them. To avoid blaming themselves and feeling guilty they can attribute the disgust or blame to others—relevant and irrelevant people and things, and 'build up an inner wall' to get separated from them. Montessori labelled these strategy 'barriers', 'repugnance' or even 'a defence against the world' (1972, pp. 158, 160). She saw no other cures for it but trust, encouragement and time.

Aggression and destruction represent the attack on either a person or an object. Swearing and stealing (without need or use for what is stolen) can be considered as modified aggression, one in verbal form and the other affecting property. Recent studies suggest that temperamental and sex differences can influence the development of aggressive behaviour patterns. Apparently extraverts are more prone to it than introverts. A higher level of plasma testosterone than average makes boys more aggressive than girls. These findings do not mean that biological factors work independently—some individuals may be more likely to be aggressive as a result of their biological makeup, but especially if they grow in an offensive, provoking environment (Hetherington & Parke, 1987; Kaiser & Raminsky, 1999). Depending on specific parental practices, aggressiveness and destructiveness can be generated in a child as demonstrative, displacing or compensative (Romanova & Grebennikov, 1996). Demonstrative aggression towards persons or inanimate objects serves the purpose of seeking attention—you can see how happy such students are after causing a rough-and-tumble, thereby catching everybody's eye. Their name is mentioned every now and then, classmates complain about them, teachers fuss around them, and the reason is most probably a lack of affiliation and acceptance at home. Displacement is defined as the 'discharge of pent-up emotions, usually of anger, on irrelevant objects, animals or people less dangerous than the source of the frustration' (Plutchik et al., 1979, p. 238). Such behavioural patterns often elicit punitive social reactions, which again makes an individual frustrated and activates an unconscious search for scapegoats towards whom their hostility can be safely directed. The last type of aggressive behaviour is connected with compensation, that is an intensive attempt to fill up or substitute in such a way for a real or imagined inadequacy. A lack of parental trust and the limitation of child's productive activity on the pretext of it being too complicated, hard or dangerous usually underlie this type of aggressiveness. As a buyoff, parents often turn a blind eye when their children act out whims or they behave bossily or violently.

How can aggression be controlled? The most effective techniques appear to be encouraging alternative pro-social behaviours, increasing a child's awareness of the harmful effects of aggression, and reorganising the environment (Muhlstein, 1990; Porter, 1999; Slaby, Arezzo, Hendrix & Roedell, 1995). For example, avoiding crowding and competition can decrease aggression (Hetherington & Parke, 1987). Another powerful technique suggested by Balson (1992) is to depreciate aggression or make it purposeless for aggressors by reacting (and teaching students to react) differently from what an attacker expects: by not fighting them and not showing fear.

In a similar family situation that is being emotionally rejected, introverted children will likely develop a different defence mechanism called repression. Those who tend to overuse it can be timid, passive, lethargic and forgetful. Their need is to avoid conflicts in social relationships. The method they use is to forget painful events and impressions, along with all associated experiences. The function of this unconscious strategy is to maintain passivity and avoid conflicts and anxiety. At school such students do not get much of teachers' attention, since they are quiet and obedient. Still, they may need it, mainly in the form of gentle encouragement, otherwise they can get behind socially and academically. It is desirable, however, that this attention should be balanced; getting too much of it makes such students prone to dependency and submission.

An antithetic attitude, in comparison with parental rejection, is extremely prolonged parent–child emotional symbiosis. It blocks the child's growing tendencies to autonomy, independent exploration of the world, feeling efficient and in control. These needs become apparent at the age of 2.5-3. By then the parent-infant type of attachment is not vital any longer, but autonomy is. Table 2 illustrates the idea of alternating significance of social attachment and separation throughout individual lifespan. Both natural drives, attachment and separation, are equally important and need to be fulfilled under specific conditions and in relevant periods of life. In fact, some parents, and mothers in particular, cannot comprehend or accept the child's call for autonomy. They fear to lose their bond with the child as a main, if not the only, sense in life. They try to prolong the attachment. This can happen if the child has been too long awaited, born weak or not quite well. Sometimes a solo parent can focus excessively on a child, making up for the lack of a partner.

The resultant parenting style, which is called over-protection, is mainly unconscious and rationalised, i.e. false motivations are invented. Generally, over-protection shows as direct and indirect support of the child's dependency and discouragement of autonomy, which ties up with Standing's first factor (cf. Standing, 1962a; 1962b). The child's real abilities are underestimated. The adult's unnecessary help and desire to excuse the child from whatever challenge or difficulty, to please the child in any way for the sake of keeping him or her attached, makes the child helpless and lazy, and the adult a slave of the child. When on their own, such children can have a feeling of self-inadequacy and inferiority. They can handle it by using regression, which is defined as 'the retreat under stress to earlier or more immature patterns of behaviour' (Plutchik et al., 1979, p. 238). In some cases it looks like restlessness, constant help-seeking, moaning, whims, and temper tantrums.

Another method for an over-protected child to control the unwelcome feelings of inadequacy and disorientation is to invent one's own imagined guide points instead of the real ones, and attribute to things their imaginable meanings. This can make some students daydream, and some may become possessive. Montessori noted that 'if a child finds no stimuli for the activities which would contribute to his development, he is attracted simply to things and desires to possess them' (1972, p. 163). Accumulating and checking one's belongings becomes tranquillising, since it gives a feeling of control over something and stands for a useful activity. There is no better remedy to cure the deviations resulting from over-protection than work described in the next section.

Table 2. Attachment and separation—general and specific issues

Basic motivation	Future and present concerns	Tendencies	Adaptation strategies
Survival	Of one's genes	Attachment	• Infant–parent symbiosis • Search for identity and belonging • Reproduction and child nurturing • Social support in senior age
	Of one's growth	Separation	• Independent exploration of the world • Checking self-efficiency • Struggle for hierarchical and territorial positions

Normalisation through work

Describing the process of normalisation, Standing (1962, p. 173) writes:

> *Into the ordered, tranquil, and harmonious atmosphere of the Montessori class enters the deviated child. It does not matter what his particular … deviation may be. He is a disordered being—that is the essence of it; his movements undisciplined, his mind without focus. Very often he is a trouble to himself, and a nuisance to his neighbours. Very likely, too, he is extremely disobedient, and wholly lacking in self-discipline. This state of things … will be terminated in the same way. One day … he will choose some occupation (very likely one he has trifled with many times before) and settle down seriously to work at it with the first spontaneous spell of concentration that he has ever shown. His feet are now on the path, which leads to normality.*

A few points in this excerpt have to be discussed. First, why do all these changes happen? As we have concluded, an organism recurrently deprived of opportunities to respond to needful stimuli searches for, and eventually finds, alternative ways of discharging energy. These can be both socially approved and unapproved behaviours. Specifically, it depends on an individual's biological makeup in combination with environmental factors—quite a few of which can be accidental. The society cannot optimise everyone's development from its very beginning, and so is forced to maintain repressive institutions such as police and prisons.

The process of socialisation cannot but limit—in more or less optimal form—some spontaneous activities and emotional expressions of growing individuals. They come to sense that expressing fear, for instance, can be shameful; anger, dangerous; joy, silly; love, pathetic; sadness, useless; rejection, rude; and so on. These emotions regroup energy within an organism, preparing it for reactions. If no response follows, an organism is in unbalanced state, which cannot last long. The unused energy will either find an alternative way out or will start to destroy an organism from within. Why do we not take care of this 'way out' in advance—by making it maximally natural, constructive and socially approved? For example, as has been mentioned, the driving force of human development from three to six years of age is striving for autonomy, initiative, and independent exploration of the world. The child vitally needs challenging stimuli and opportunity to respond to them. Adults, for different reasons, can limit the child's inclinations, and not only because they may reject the child or be excessively attached to her/him. Lots of things the child wants to use, for example kitchen appliances, are of adult size and weight, and not adapted for a child in terms of safety. Another example is self-dressing: often there is no time, nor special aids, to practise it at home. Summing up, if we want to avoid or cure deviations, we cannot just limit some child's intentions; we must also provide a selection of relevant and constructive activities in exchange.

Another important point which Standing makes is: 'Into the ordered, tranquil, and harmonious atmosphere of the Montessori class enters the deviated child.' Thus, two necessary conditions for normalisation he indicates are: (1) the ordered, tranquil, and harmonious atmosphere established in the class. If a class has been recently organised or a new teacher has been employed, it would be a good idea to avoid taking students with certain problems into that class. (2) Further: '… enters the deviated child.' Does this mean one difficult child at a time? If it does, I would vote for it. If you get a group of students, especially with one and the same conduct problem, you are in trouble, not just in terms of distributing your time, but also because these students are always wound up by each other. A good idea is to show such a child that no-one in the group is impressed by his or her behaviour, since they have much more interesting things to do. Any behaviour, including deviant behaviour, is purposeful. It is undertaken for some purpose. While it is successful, it goes on. Make it purposeless—and it stops (Balson, 1992; Kaiser & Raminsky, 1999; Rodd, 1996). There is no use in aggression if no-one around is provocative or scared. There is no sense in being submissive if no one suppresses you. It is awkward and dull to be idle when everyone is busy. Success in activities brings much more satisfaction than just having things in possession.

Standing does not mention the need for cooperative parents. Difficult children often have difficult parents, who can be unable to comprehend the situation. All the same, an effort should be made to reach at least some mutual understanding, otherwise teachers' efforts can be to no avail. In summary, the conditions of normalisation are: a correctly organised environment with free choice of work to concentrate on; an established atmosphere of tranquillity and order; a mature class with experienced teacher(s), one student with a certain problem at a time; and cooperative parents.

The characteristics of the normalised child

Standing (1962a, pp. 175-178) lists these as follows:

- Love of order
- Love of work
- Profound spontaneous concentration
- Attachment to reality
- Love of silence and working alone
- Sublimation of the possessive instinct
- Power to act from real choice and not from curiosity
- Conscious obedience
- Independence and initiative
- Spontaneous self-discipline
- Joy

I would like to reflect on three of these characteristics: love of order, love of silence, and acting from real choice. It is not for the first time, as I am trying to comprehend a long-living prejudice alleging that mess and noise are inevitable attributes of young children (Grebennikov, 2000; 2003). Natural science suggests that living beings' survival and advancement are ensured through successful adaptation. Adaptation succeeds in stable and consistent surroundings. Hence, all living beings would prefer order. At early childhood settings, some students may look as though they have an innate drive for enjoying or creating mess, whereas they just seek to replicate patterns of primary environment—very likely the parent home environment—to maintain the sense of belonging. The earlier these students are placed in a perfectly-ordered setting, the sooner they start enjoying order. They become real custodians of class rules and regulations, immediately spotting and correcting anyone—a newcomer or a visitor—who breaks a rule.

An analogous approach can be undertaken to understanding noise alleged to be natural in early childhood environments. There can be a temporary period in children's lives when some of them like to make noises to check their physical abilities in reference to the environment. Still, no-one likes to stay in noise because it distracts us from whatever we do. It disturbs our concentration and makes us less efficient than we could be. If a child is noisy, this means that at one time, somewhere, he or she had to adapt to noisy surroundings where one always needed to shout to be heard. In the peaceful and quiet classroom, this need disappears, and this gradually normalises the behaviour. Finally, the 'real' choice, which Standing sets against 'not from curiosity' choice, could be interpreted in the sense that, if a child chooses a thing only because of its appearance, but having no idea of how it works—this child can soon lose the interest. Quite a different matter is a choice from things a child knows how to operate. In this case they choose an activity, not just an object. As a rule this indicates that the activity is beneficial for their development at the current stage. It also sets off the sublimation of the possessive instinct, because you cannot really possess an activity—it is something you do, not have.

Conclusion

Understanding human misconduct has always been a challenge for sociologists, psychologists and educationalists. Among other factors, vicissitudes of babyhood and early childhood are believed to play a considerable role in the moulding of long-term patterns of individual behaviour. The ideas of Montessori and Standing regarding deviations rising from mistreatment in infancy, viewed from a psychological standpoint, can help us understand and normalise not only 'classic' challenging behaviours such as aggressiveness or destructiveness, but also other action patterns described by these scholars as abnormal. These are: possessiveness, refuge in fantasies, overdependence, untidiness, and noisiness, which some adults still consider inevitable attributes of young children. Specific strategies caregivers can use to help students with both conduct and personality problems include: identification of an inward nature of problems, depreciation of unwanted actions or making them aimless, provision of free choice of well-organised and purposeful activities, avoiding crowding and competition, cultivating an atmosphere of calm and order, encouraging pro-social behaviours, looking after only one student with difficult behaviour at a time, and always taking into account the student's family situation.

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RESPONSE TO 'THE NORMALISED CHILD', L. GREBENNIKOV

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Grebennikov has chosen to present to the contemporary gaze, the so-called 'absolute' concepts of Maria Montessori regarding normalisation and deviation in childhood. A courageous move indeed, in times when few would dare to postulate such a singular interpretation of 'truth'.

The issue of deviancy, however, was a significant topic in the early part of the twentieth century, as researchers in the new social sciences sought to establish causes for differences in behaviour. Montessori was an active researcher in this field and her expertise ranged through medicine, psychology, anthropology, and education. She began, in 1900, to work with children who were then known as 'deficients' and had previously been relegated to a miserable life on the streets or in adult asylums. Montessori had campaigned to set up a teaching and research institute, where she would have the chance to work with and draw out the potentialities of these children. Her hypothesis was that if such work could be carried out early on, then avoidance of later criminal or deviant tendencies would be achieved.

A little later, Montessori had the opportunity to work with children in the early childhood field and applied somewhat similar methods with the result that the 'deviations' described by Grebennikov began to fall away and the possibility of what she termed the 'new' or 'normalised' child was realised.

Grebennikov has focussed on the issue of challenging behaviour and the 'deviations' identified by Montessori 100 years ago. His discursive treatment of the topic complicates Montessori's simple point: that it is adults who largely create the problems of deviancy when they place obstacles in the way of the child (O'Shaughnessy, 2004; Zener, 1999). Zener suggests the term 'deviancy' means a deviation or detour from the path of development. The solution for Montessori (1936/1989) lies both in the adult facing their mistakes and in the environment we prepare for the child. In attending to these crucial matters, the child is thus freed to construct self in a holistic framework.

Campbell (2002) suggests that the transactional–ecological view is now the accepted framework from which to interpret the psychopathology of young children. That is, the view that incorporates families, communities and other external influences along with the interior life and development of the child. In a detailed exploration of preschool child behaviour problems, she outlines the clusters of behaviour that help us to define typologies of behaviour disorder. In the same vein as Montessori (1949/1988), Campbell notes two major divisions, those relating to under-control—externalising behaviours that are expressed outwards in tantrums, fighting, destructive behaviour and disobedience; and those relating to over-control—expressed in internalising behaviour such as social withdrawal, fearfulness, unhappiness, anxiety and self-focussed expressions of distress. She notes that hundreds of studies have confirmed these clusters. Grebennikov too brings these divisions to our attention.

Unlike Grebennikov, however, I suggest that Montessori differed from the deficit view he takes of the child. In referring to Balson, a popular writer who dispenses behaviourist advice for the primary-aged child and classroom, Grebennikov appears to miss the solution for the younger child. Montessori believed that the young child in early education should be treated gently. She suggests employing a time of special love and care; in essence, enabling the child to step back a developmental stage. She then adds the provision of simpler occupations and the understanding of a community of peers and believes that it is this that works to soothe a disturbed child. The next step is to be found in the power of engagement. Once the child has found some meaningful activity and the beginnings of concentration are seen, it is her view that the child is on the pathway to 'normalisation'. A final step was to be found in what was, for that time, the radical innovation of requiring regular consultation between parent and teacher.

So how do we define a normalised or fully realised and contributing human being? It was a pity that Grebennikov did not look to the field of positive psychology rather than to the behaviourists, for it is here that fruitful links have been made to Montessori's ideas. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) sees the state of concentration that Montessori observed as the healing and growth mechanism in young children, being strongly allied to his concept of 'flow'. We experience this state whenever we are deeply engaged in any cognitive, social, spiritual or physical experience and Csikszentmihalyi (2003) suggests it is what leads us forward to develop skills that help us to meet life's challenges.

Finally, Grebennikov has surveyed a variety of aspects in the field of child behaviour but has not provided us with any specific verification of the Montessori approach from current Montessori literature and research. Perhaps, when he has more than 'anecdotal' evidence regarding contemporary Montessori early childhood centres, then we could listen further to what he has to say.

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‘QUEERYING’ GENDER:
Heteronormativity in early childhood education

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This paper explores heteronormativity and argues for the ‘queerying’ of gender in early childhood education. The author argues, utilising Butler’s theory of performativity and heterosexual matrix, that the construction of gender in young children’s lives requires an analysis of the normalising practices in which gendered identities are simultaneously heterosexualised. It is upheld that the dominant discourse of childhood in conjunction with developmentalist theory render sexuality as irrelevant to children’s lives, thus resulting in a radical silencing and dismissal of how children become sexualised subjects. Thus these discourses operate to render invisible the process of heteronormativity operating in children’s lives, including in early childhood educational contexts. It is argued that, if the intimate relationship between gender and sexuality is not incorporated into understandings of constructions of gendered identities, we will continue to get only a partial perspective of what is happening in this process

Introduction

Over the past decade or so, research has increasingly documented the process of gender construction in early childhood. This research has highlighted how children themselves are active and knowing agents in this process, engaging in the policing of gender performances of other children (and adults), within rigid boundaries of what is widely considered ‘appropriate’ masculine and feminine behaviours (Alloway, 1995; Davies, 1989; 1993; Grieshaber, 1998; MacNaughton, 2000). In addition, research has begun to identify the significant role of the curriculum and educators’ pedagogical practices in constructing and normalising children’s gendered identities (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2000; Robinson & Jones Diaz, in press). However, a critical issue that seems to have received limited focus within the exploration of gender construction in children’s lives is the way gender is inextricably constituted within and normalised through the process of ‘heterosexualisation’ (Butler, 1990). The construction of children’s gendered identities cannot be fully understood without acknowledging how the dominant discourses of femininity and masculinity are heteronormalised in their everyday lives, including through their educational experiences. That is, by the processes of gendering, children are constructed as heterosexual beings. This paper, through an exploration of heteronormativity in early childhood education, aims to ‘queery’ the construction of gender in early childhood, highlighting the intimate links between gender and sexuality. It is argued that, despite the prevalence of the dominant discourse of childhood, which constitutes children as innocent, asexual and too young to understand sexuality, thus rendering sexuality as irrelevant to their lives, the construction of heterosexual desire and identities in early childhood is an integral part of children’s everyday educational experiences. This process of heterosexualisation is rendered invisible through the heteronormativity that operates through such discourses and is naturalised within constructions of gender.

What is heteronormativity?

What is meant by heteronormativity? This term is used to designate how heterosexuality is constituted as the norm in sexuality. The perceived ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ status of heterosexuality is presumed through the process of normalisation; it takes on an unquestionable position of being the ‘true’ sexuality, the natural order of things, primarily through the way that it is linked to the male–female biological binary and procreation. However, as Epstein and Johnson (1994, p.198) point out, the normalisation of heterosexuality is ‘encoded in language, in institutional practices and the encounters of everyday life’. For example, religious discourses and practices operate as a significant component of the normalisation process of heterosexuality, particularly in relation to parenting and families; gay and lesbian parenting and families are often actively excluded from definitions of what is considered a family. The assumption often made on enrolment forms in early childhood settings, that children come from heterosexual families, is another example of this process. Thus, the normalisation of heterosexuality is a social phenomenon that is actively negotiated, with its dominant discourses and narratives primarily constituted within the socially constructed cultural binary of heterosexual us–homosexual them: a powerful hierarchy in which heterosexuality defines and speaks with perceived authority about the 'other'. Institutionalised heterosexuality thus becomes the definer of 'legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements' (Ingraham, 1994, p.204) and the norm by which all other sexualities are defined as different, illegitimate and abnormal. Within this framework, heterosexuality becomes compulsory (Rich, 1980). As Letts IV (1999) points out, heteronormativity is ultimately about power; a reinforcing of a 'culture of power' associated with heterosexuality. Within this culture of power the normalisation of heterosexuality is rendered invisible and diverts attention and critique away from the macro and micro social, economic and political discursive practices, including those operating in educational institutions that construct and maintain this hierarchy of difference across sexual identities.

The intimate relationship between gender and sexuality: Butler's performativity and 'heterosexual matrix'

Research in recent years has increased awareness of the construction of gender in early childhood education. This research has resulted in a greater understanding of how subjects become gendered beings; that is how and why children actively take up particular ways of being boys or girls. Butler's notion of performativity is useful in understanding the construction of gender and looking at the ways girls and boys assert their gendered subjectivities. As defined by Butler (1994, p. 33), performativity is 'that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names … this production actually always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation'. Clarifying this definition, she points out that performativity 'is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established' (1994, p. 33). How and where masculinities and femininities are played out, culturally and historically, is how hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity get established, instituted, circulated and confirmed (Butler, 1994); it is the repetition of the performance of masculinities and femininities that constructs and reconstructs the masculine and feminine subject. Thus, gendered identities are constructed from the performances of subjects and the performances of other subjects towards them. Children repetitively perform their femininity and masculinity, in order to 'do it right' in front of their peers and others (Butler, 1990) and it is through this repetitive process that the feminine and masculine subject becomes defined and constructed. It is crucial to point out that the concept of gender 'performance' is always one enacted within strictly defined cultural boundaries; what counts as a performance of masculinity or femininity is rigidly defined and policed by the sociocultural context of the particular time. Getting one's gender performance right is critical, as individuals run the risk of being ostracised or bullied if they do not conform to what is generally upheld as appropriate boy or girl behaviours. What constitutes the knowledge of what it means to be a boy or a girl is based on the multiple discourses of masculinity and femininity that are culturally and historically available, which intersect with other sites of identity such as 'race', ethnicity, class, sexuality and so on. However, the dominant or hegemonic discourses of gender in various cultural contexts operate powerfully at both the macro and micro levels of society to define what is considered 'normal' gender performances and to police the 'correctness' of such behaviours; for example, normal gender performances of masculinity and femininity are heterosexualised. Gender performances are constituted within relations of power, they embody norms of behaviour which subjects aspire to achieve, and reinforce the power of certain groups over others, such as heterosexuals over non-heterosexuals or queer identities. The poststructuralist notion that individuals are shifting subjects who are volatile, contradictory and changing, rather than rational, unified and static beings, provides a crucial framework in understanding the continual complexities of taking up gendered identities. Individual boys and girls, who are active agents in the construction of their own subjectivities, will locate themselves within certain discourses of masculinities or femininities, taking up these meanings and social relationships as their own. However, one's subjective positioning is not fixed, but can discursively shift as individuals read their locations within relations of power, claiming or resisting discourses according to what they want to achieve (Hollway, 1984). The young boy who engages in bullying behaviour as a performance of his masculinity, reinforced through a tentative respect from his peers (albeit a respect often based on fear) and societal and media representations of appropriate performances of masculinity often associated with displays of aggression (e.g. Rugby League sporting heroes), will generally not be persuaded to change his behaviour by pleas of hurting another child's feelings. Getting the performance of this form of masculinity correct, especially in front of peers, is often about public displays of aggression over others.

Of particular importance to Butler is how the construction of gender is assumed to be a natural process given by biology. The effect of the range of gendered performance is to make it appear that there are two distinct natures, male and female. As pointed out by Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon (2002, p. 99) 'What we take to be "nature" is therefore an effect rather than a cause of our gendered acts.' The repetition of normalised gender performance polarised within the cultural binary male–female, which is socially constituted, renders this behaviour as being a given from nature, or one's biology.

Similar to the construction of gender, sexuality is socially and culturally constituted, with desire constructed and policed through powerful societal discourses (e.g. particular religious and legal discourses) and social practices that are institutionally and individually supported at both the micro and macro levels in society. However, as gender is made to appear as being from nature and biology, so is sexuality, with the relationship between the two viewed as symmetrical. As Wilton (1996, p. 127) points out, 'This profoundly ideological notion of complementary gendered polarity—heteropolarity—has become the mystified and naturalised organising principle which saturates Western culture, structuring thought and social organisation around notions of binarism, complementarity, unidirectionality and polarity.' Through this process of normalisation, heterosexuality is upheld as the natural, instinctual, desired, appropriate sexuality, with all other deviations from this behaviour considered unnatural and abnormal. Sexuality, like gender, is perceived as shifting, changing, flexible and fluid; it is produced by society in complex ways, through diverse social practices, individual and social definitions; it is about relations of power. As Weeks points out, 'Sexuality is not a given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency' (1986, p. 25).

Butler (1990) utilises the concept of a heterosexual matrix to identify this naturalised process of gender heteronormalisation. Butler perceives this heterosexual matrix as 'a grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalised'. It is a 'hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality' (1990, p. 151). In other words, Alsop, Fitzsimmons and Lennon (2002, p. 97), exploring Butler's theory, point out that 'it is the "epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality", which drives our division into male and female, and which itself structures our understanding of biology'. Thus, in Butler's perspective, it is the presumption of heterosexuality that ascribes bodies as gendered, rather than traditional perspectives which uphold that the natural distinction of bodies into male and female signifies the normality and naturalness of heterosexuality.

How gender and heterosexuality intimately and powerfully intersect in the definition and normalisation of each other is critical to an understanding of the construction of individuals, including children, as gendered and sexualised subjects. Although there is an increasing understanding of how gender construction operates in children's lives, the way stable notions of gender, sex and desire are constituted, expressed and normalised through compulsory heterosexuality (that is, how gender is heterosexualised and sexuality is simultaneously normalised as heterosexual) needs greater recognition in the field of early childhood education. This is particularly so if gender equity strategies employed in early childhood education are to be fully effective.

Hegemonic discourses of children and sexuality: Contributions to the invisibilisation of heteronormativity

In terms of fully understanding heteronormativity in early childhood it is important to explore the contribution that the dominant discourses of childhood and sexuality make to render this practice invisible. It is largely through the powerful intersection of these discourses and their reinforcement through psychological discourses of child development that sexuality is constructed as both irrelevant to children's lives and a 'taboo' subject in their education. Thus, within this context, heteronormativity largely continues unabated in early childhood education as an unacknowledged and invisible everyday practice. This perceived and constructed irrelevance of sexuality to children's subjectivity results in a radical splitting off of sexuality from the construction of children's gendered lives both discursively and materially. That is, the role of heterosexuality in understandings of the construction of gender in early childhood tends to be silenced and rendered invisible in the development of theory, research, pedagogical strategies or policies. This process has critical implications for current understandings of the constructions of gender and sexuality in early childhood, for, without an understanding of how gender is constituted within heterosexuality, as previously discussed in this paper, the full picture of this process is never realised. It would be like reading Cinderella without acknowledging the construction of heterosexual desire as a major subset of the story; or discussing the impact of Barbie on constructions of femininity, without acknowledging Barbie's assumed heterosexuality and imagined relationship with Ken, as a critical component of this gendering process.

The relationship between children and sexuality is one shrouded in controversy, steeped in social taboos and founded in contradictions. As this relationship has been dealt with in depth elsewhere (see Gittins, 1998; Robinson, 2002; 2005), I will provide only a summary of it here. The relationship between childhood and sexuality is primarily constituted within dominant western discourses of childhood and sexuality, and the adult–child binarism that underpins these discourses. This binary relationship differentiates and segregates the lives of adults and children into polarised worlds, as well as constituting and perpetuating adults' power (and their right to power) over children, resulting in a myriad of inequalities between adults and children. Children are perceived and constructed as being totally dependent on adults for their survival and wellbeing, and become the powerless and voiceless 'Other' within this relationship. In postcolonial terms, Cannella and Viruru (2004) argue that children have become colonised by adults. The modernist dominant discourses of childhood and sexuality primarily construct children as innocent and pure; as asexual, immature, and undeveloped beings, with no control over their bodies. They are ultimately considered 'too young' physically, cognitively and emotionally to comprehend and understand sexuality, which is considered to begin at puberty when the child's body starts its physiological transformation into adult maturity. Sexuality is constituted as an 'adults only' issue and an aspect of adult life in which children are particularly vulnerable and in need of protection. Therefore, dealing with sexuality with children is generally regarded as developmentally inappropriate (Robinson, 2002). Research conducted by Robinson and Jones Diaz (2000) highlights that children's understandings of sexuality, including their own sexual development, are not generally viewed by early childhood educators as being important or relevant to their early education. Within these readings of sexuality, it is important to point out that it seems to be always narrowly defined and understood in terms of physical sexual acts, rather than an integral part of children's and adults' subjectivity and identity. Such a narrow reading of sexuality allows people to dismiss its relevance to the lives of children and young people, who are perceived to be physically sexually inactive; they certainly hope this to be the case. However, sexuality is more broadly about relationships, life choices and practices, dispositions, pleasures, desires and fantasies—all of which are aspects of everyday life in which both children and adults actively engage. For example, sexuality is an integral part of the lives of many young children who are being raised by lesbian or gay parents, or have family and close friends who are gay or lesbian; they have to negotiate the everyday consequences of those people doing sexuality differently. Further, children's and young people's sexual desires and fantasies can be expressed and played out through their choices of friendships, clothing and music.

However, despite the prevalence and dominance of the discourse that children are asexual beings, adults have, ironically, gone to great lengths to 'control' and police children's (and young adults') sexual behaviours; in fact moral panic often surrounds any perception of children being active sexual beings or being knowledgeable of sexuality issues (For an in-depth discussion of this see Gittins, 1998; Jenkins, 1998; Sedgwick, 1998; Wolfenstein, 1998). For example, in the early twentieth century infants were considered to have 'strong and dangerous impulses', including autoeroticism, masturbation and thumb-sucking (Wolfenstein, 1998, p. 200). These behaviours were viewed as easily growing out of control, resulting in the child being 'wrecked for life' (Wolfenstein, 1998, p. 200). Children's masturbation reflected the counter discourse that children were sexual beings. Mothers were advised to be extremely vigilant in checking for such taboo and 'dirty' behaviours in their infants. As Foucault (1978) points out in his *History of Sexuality*, sexual taboos resulted in the close surveillance of individuals with the purpose of altering physical modes of behaviour. Masturbation in young female infants was viewed as more morally obscene due to the prevailing gendered discourses around sexuality that constructed females as pure, virginal, asexual, lacking in their own sexual desire and ultimately sexual vessels for the pleasure of men (Gittins, 1998; Robinson, 2005). The need for such surveillance in infants resulted in various practices to inhibit autoerotic behaviour in children, including tying the child's feet to the opposite sides of the crib in order that the child's thighs could not rub together and pinning nightgown sleeves to the bed so the child could not touch itself (Wolfenstein, 1998, p. 200).

As pointed out, major contradictions have existed, and still do in respect of children and sexuality. These are often constructed around adult fears. For example, Patton (1995) points out that adults often fear providing children and youth with sexual knowledge, believing that it will directly result in 'causing' them to have sex prematurely. Similar fears exist around discussing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer sexualities in that it might 'cause' children and youth to take up these sexual identities. This fear and ambivalence associated with dealing with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer sexualities is reflected through the concerns of this early childhood teacher educator:

> *[Teachers have to be] very careful about the way that they present the information [on gay and lesbian issues] because young minds are very malleable and you know I don't know whether you bring up people to be open minded about it and be aware. I don't know if you could say definitively why one person becomes homosexual and why one person doesn't* (Robinson & Ferfolja, in press).

Of particular importance is the fear that many adults have, understandably, in relation to children's vulnerability to sexual abuse from adults and sometimes from older children. The prevalence of this abuse in homes and other frequented places, perpetrated largely by those generally well-known to and trusted by children, is a major social epidemic that continues to thrive despite government and community interventions to protect children. This sexual abuse of children is about power, which is primarily constituted within the adult–child binary that underpins the power relations between adults and children. However, as I have argued elsewhere (see Robinson, 2005), the constructed silence, irrelevance and taboos in terms of talking about sexuality with children and youth, often in the name of protection, have ironically contributed to their vulnerability to abuse and other risks. Adults have generally failed to provide children with the knowledge, understandings and confidence to be competent individuals in this area. Ironically, children who have an understanding of sex and sexuality are often 'othered' as 'unnatural children', with 'unnatural knowledge', and this knowledge is generally considered to be a possible signifier of children's sexual abuse or unconventional family's practices. Thus, within this discursive context, there have been critical material consequences; children grow up with very little information, if any, about sex and sexuality; the secrecy and taboo nature of sexuality results in children often being fearful of talking about sexuality issues with adults; and the information they do have is often misinformation gained from discussions with peers. Therefore, children can become vulnerable to exploiting adults and older children. Ironically, as pointed out by Kitzinger (1990), it is primarily childhood 'innocence' and perceived powerlessness that feeds into adult male sexual titillation in cases of child sexual abuse. Only in recent years has a serious challenge been made to the adult–child binary and the dominant discourses of childhood operating to silence children's voices, largely through the reconceptualising early childhood movement and the new sociology of childhood. As pointed out by Gittins (1998, p. 107), 'Children, generally well looked after and protected, are none the less extremely vulnerable as a result of their own dependencies, isolation, silencing and disenfranchisement.'

A further consequence of the frenzy or moral panic associated with 'protecting children', particularly relevant to early childhood educators, is that all touch becomes scrutinised and potentially dangerous. As a result, educators become fearful of engaging in any touch with young children, and this can impact on the positive development and expression of caring relationships between adults and children (or educators and children) which can be critical to children's wellbeing and their learning.

Heteronormativity in early childhood education

It is argued in this paper that the practice of heteronormativity in early childhood education is largely rendered invisible through the hegemonic discourses that constitute understandings of childhood and sexuality. The presumption that children are asexual, 'too young' and 'innocent' to understand sexuality is contradicted by the fact that the construction of heterosexuality and heterosexual desire is an integral part of children's everyday experiences, including their early education; for example, children's literature widely used in early childhood education constantly reinforces a heterosexual narrative (Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999;

Theilheimer & Cahill, 2001). This process of heterosexualisation continues largely unabated, acknowledged only when it is perceived to not be working effectively, that is when the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality seem to be transgressed, when children's heterogendered constructions seem to be unacceptably and inappropriately slipping beyond the norms. This fear is also conveyed by parents who are concerned about their male child becoming gay as a result of dressing in women's clothes in the home corner; or through educators who actively problematise and discourage young children's desire for same-sex relations if they transgress from what is perceived to be normalised heterosexual gendered behaviour—such as young boys in early childhood settings articulating their wish to 'marry' the person they love best, often their best male friend (Wallis & Van Every, 2000). It seems that it is through such transgressions that children learn lessons about what is acceptable and what is intolerable.

In recent years research has demonstrated play as a critical site of gender construction (Alloway, 1995; MacNaughton, 2000). However, the fact that it is also equally a significant site of the construction of heterosexuality has received less focus in the research. Mock weddings, mothers and fathers, chasing and kissing games, and girlfriends/boyfriends are all examples of young children's narratives of their experiences in their early education. Such activities are often viewed as a natural part of children's everyday lives and are rarely questioned by educators. Seldom are they considered part of the 'normalisation' of the construction of heterosexual desire and the inscription of heterogendered subjectivities in young children. Such heterosexualised activities are not linked to understandings of sexuality but are seen as 'children being children', a natural part of growing-up that is often linked to biological perceptions of child development. Epstein (1995) has argued that the relationship between gender and sexuality is critical to an understanding of sexism and heterosexism in education, pointing out that sexism cannot be understood without an analysis of its relationship with heterosexuality.

Therefore, the construction of (hetero)sexuality is part of children's everyday lives, including what is learned in their early educational experiences, but it is rarely ever noticed, and almost never thought about. It is important to refocus our critical lens on construction of gender in early childhood in order to understand how gender is heterosexualised through heteronormative daily practices and interactions with peers, family, and in schooling and other institutions working with children. The media, popular culture, and children's literature play a major role in the perpetuation of heteronormativity in children's everyday lives. Children are heterosexualised through advertisements, which send strong messages to children and adults about appropriate heterogendered behaviour. For example, in a magazine about dining out in an Australian city, one advertisement for a local cafe used a picture of a young boy and girl (possibly seven or eight years of age) drinking coffee together and sharing a plate of fruit and ice-cream. Reading the text in terms of constructions of masculinity and femininity, the boy, dressed in black, is positioned as being taller than the girl, in control, in an active pose holding his cup of coffee while smiling and looking down at his 'date', who is sitting closely beside him. The girl is wearing a light, sleeveless, floral dress in pinks and mauves and a straw hat ringed with pink and crimson roses; she has her hands folded under her chin and is smiling. This gendered reading is not complete without noticing that this scenario is very much heterosexualised. The look on the girl's face is one of coyness, seduction and desire as she leans forward, smiling demurely but avoiding the boy's alluring gaze. They show no interest at all in the tantalising plate of ice-cream and fruit in front of them but are totally engrossed in each other's company. The picture gives the impression that the food is only a backdrop to a scene full of sexual anticipation. The caption below the picture reads: 'Ahhh … This is coffee'.

This advertisement is one of many where the heterogendered construction of young children is viewed in terms of 'cuteness' and the discourse of childhood innocence silences and renders invisible the heteronormativity operating within the texts. Children's literature and films also provide numerous examples of the ways children's cultures and children's gendered lives are heterosexualised. Giroux pertinently points out that 'Children's culture is a sphere where entertainment, advocacy, and pleasure meet to construct conceptions of what it means to be a child occupying a combination of gender, racial and, class positions in society through which one defines oneself in relation to a myriad of others' (1995, p. 1). An examination of the last page of five randomly-chosen children's classics that have been made into highly successful Disney films—*Beauty and the Beast, A Bug's Life, Anastasia, The Little Mermaid and Peter Pan*—demonstrated the pervasiveness of the fantasised heterosexual happy ending. *Peter Pan* was the only book that did not obviously end on the last page with this message, though it is certainly a discourse found throughout the text itself. Giroux (1995, p. 2) comments that 'Disney films combine an ideology of enchantment and aura of innocence in narrating stories that help children understand who they are, what societies are about, and what it means to construct a world of play and fantasy in an adult environment.'

It is critical to acknowledge and name the heterogendered performances operating in the everyday lives of children and in the examples given above. However, the voices and the interpretations that we hear almost exclusively around these issues (when we hear them) are those of adults. This is reflective of the heteronormativity operating around constructions of gender, but it is also, as I have argued elsewhere (Robinson, 2005), an additional consequence of the dominating discourses of childhood and sexuality (and those associated child protection discourses), in that we rarely, if at all, know what sense children make of them; their voices on these issues are rarely heard. It is important to ask questions such as: Are children aware of the heterosexualised nature of the scripts they are either drawing on or refusing in terms of their own gender performances? How do children interpret sexuality and actively construct their sexualised worlds? Working with children to explore their understandings and knowledge about gender and sexuality is important, but it involves negotiating the many social barriers and cultural fears that operate largely around sexuality and children. Apart from questioning the relevance of the issues to children, any researcher may be simultaneously placed under suspicion regarding their motives. Yet it is crucial to have a greater understanding of children's views on sexuality and the way that they construct their sexual worlds. It seems that the double-edged sword of 'protection' has left children with little agency and voice in respect of these issues.

What does queer theory/pedagogy have to offer early childhood educators?

Queer theory, which stems from poststructuralist theoretical perspectives, reinforces the notion that identities are not fixed or stable, but rather are shifting, contradictory, dynamic and constructed. This perspective upholds that all identities are performances, and challenges normalising practices, particularly in terms of sexuality and the heteronormative constructions of gender, which has been the focus of this paper. It challenges the unquestionable, natural and normal positioning of heterosexuality as the superior sexuality and the 'othering' of non-heterosexual identities, which is constituted within the cultural binary heterosexual us–homosexual them (see Jagose, 1996). The term 'queer' encompasses those who feel 'marginalized by mainstream sexuality' (Morris, 2000, p. 20), including those who see themselves as heterosexual but challenge the conformity constituted and enforced in hegemonic discourses of heterosexuality. Ultimately, queer theory disrupts the notion that one's gender and sexuality are inherently fixed in one's biological sexed body, upholding the pluralities of sexuality and the multiplicity of gender. This perspective provides a critical theoretical lens through which one can begin to see the everyday processes of heteronormativity operating within these contexts.

Queer pedagogy, informed by queer theory, thus undertakes to critically examine what is considered to be the natural order of things in terms of gender and sexuality; for example, that heterosexuality is presumed to be the natural, unquestionable and only correct sexuality and the point from which all other sexualities are judged; or that there are natural and normal ways of being boys or girls. Similar to doing feminist poststructuralist pedagogy (e.g. Davies, 1994; MacNaughton, 2000; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 1999), queer pedagogy seeks to identify the normalising discourses constituting common-sense understandings that define, restrict and police gendered and sexualised identities within the narrow boundaries of hegemonic masculinity and femininity, which are heterosexualised. For example, it is seen as natural for boys to play chase-and-kiss with girls. Queer pedagogy is primarily about disrupting and destabilising the cultural binaries male–female, sex–gender, heterosexual–homosexual explicit or implicit in these normalising discourses that operate to constitute and perpetuate artificial hierarchical relations of power between their constructed polarised opposites. For example, exploring the power relations inherent within polarised knowledge about boys and girls, such as boys are tough, loud and physically active, while girls are perceived as being quiet, softly-spoken, preferring to sit, read or talk with friends. This perspective reminds educators that, to fully understand the processes involved in the construction of gender in young children's lives, it is critical to acknowledge how this same process simultaneously constructs their sexualised identities. For example, Barbie is not just a powerful and persuasive representation of particular socially sanctioned ways of doing femininity, but of the normalisation of heterosexuality, which is an unspoken. Thus, queer pedagogy is about deconstructing (see MacNaughton, 1998); that is, critically unpacking the normalising discourses that construct knowledge of gender and sexuality, including those operating every day in educational settings; exploring the values and assumptions constituted within these discourses; the purpose of the discourses; how particular subjects are positioned within these discourses; who benefits from these discourses and who does not; and how these discourses contribute to the policies and practices of broader social, economic and political structures. For example, the popular children's books (and films) identified previously in this paper can be used with children in order to explore what cultural scripts are implicit and explicit in the texts and how they work to position the reader (or viewer).

Queer pedagogy encourages educators to ask questions (regardless of how heretical they may initially seem!) that highlight and challenge how particular ways of doing gender and sexuality are normalised to the point that they become unquestionable. For example, what would happen if Barbie identified as a lesbian or queer? How would this challenge children's and adult's perceptions of Barbie? What does it say about Ken? The role Barbie has played in terms of constructions of gender in young girls' lives has been the focus of critique, but there has been limited discussion about how Barbie's heterogendered identity impacts on the construction of young girls' heterosexual identities and desire. How would children and adults react if Barbie changed her gender performance to represent a more queer identity; that is, a performance which disrupts emphasised femininity and challenges assumptions about her assumed heterosexuality? How far would they let her gender slippage go? Interestingly, a close friend gave her six-year-old niece a Barbie to add to her extensive collection. This Barbie was different, many hours were spent 'queering' Barbie up; she represented a different performance of gender that was not easily read as heterosexual. Barbie's hair was cut short, she had several tattoos, a nose and nipple ring, black leather clothes, and so on. Despite all the effort put into this performance, this 'Queer Barbie' lasted less than a week—she was found defrocked and mutilated (missing limbs), hidden at the bottom of the cupboard; 'Queer Barbie' was well and truly reprimanded for her gender 'slippage' and was ostracised from her more respectable hetero-feminised cousins. Finally, it is important to include adults in these questions, as it could be argued that many parents of young girls have great investments in Barbie's heterogendered identities and practices and would also be disturbed to see a queerying of her gender performance.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for a 'queerying' of gender in early childhood education. I uphold that, until an appreciation of the heterosexualisation of gender is incorporated into understandings of constructions of masculinities and femininities in children's lives, conceptions of gender will remain incomplete and partial. It is critical to acknowledge the intimate links between gender and sexuality and that, in the process of gender construction, children are simultaneously constructed as heterosexual beings. Any examination of the construction of gender in young children's lives therefore needs to include a focus on how gender is inextricably constituted within and normalised through the process of heterosexualisation that operates through everyday practices, including those in education. However, it is also highlighted that the process of heterosexualisation is largely rendered invisible through two main avenues: through the heteronormativity that operates in dominant discourses of childhood and sexuality, which primarily depict sexuality as irrelevant to children; and through the way it is 'naturalised' within constructions of gender. These two issues have largely contributed to a radical closing off of any examination of the heterosexualisation of gender in children's lives. Consequently, the construction of children as heterosexual subjects, a daily occurrence in early childhood education despite the perceived irrelevance of sexuality to children's subjectivity, which is operating through the curriculum, children's play, educators' practices, children's literature, and so on, is rarely acknowledged by educators. Interestingly, this process seems to come to the fore only when children's gender performances transgress from those that are heterosexualised and thus viewed as problematic. Experiences of retributions for such transgressions become powerful lessons in which children learn what is acceptable and what is intolerable in terms of their gender performances. This brings into critical view the importance of educators examining their own subject positions in terms of children and sexuality and the impacts this can have on children's choices.

Through highlighting queer pedagogy and teaching strategies based on feminist poststructural principles, the paper offers early childhood educators some potential avenues to address the issues raised. For example, far from a call to dismiss the books identified in this discussion outright for their largely inherent heterosexism and sexism (or classism or racism), many such children's texts currently used by educators are critical resources that can provide opportunities to re-examine with children the cultural scripts implicit and explicit in the texts and how they operate to position the readers/viewers. Queer pedagogy calls for asking different questions from those usually employed in order to deconstruct 'the normal' inherent in the texts. Exploring children's readings of various texts and providing the space for different readings and different questions can lead to an awareness of children's understandings of gender, sexuality, and the intimate links between them.

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WHAT CHILDREN'S CORTISOL LEVELS TELL US ABOUT QUALITY IN CHILDCARE CENTRES

Margaret Sims
Andrew Guilfoyle
Trevor Parry
Edith Cowan University

The Australian childcare profession has watched with some concern results of research coming out of North America indicating that child care is not good for children. This research identifies undesirable outcomes in children's development and behaviour as a result of childcare attendance. How does this research apply to Australian children in Australian childcare centres? Australian research is limited, and this paper reports on results to date of an Australian study of children's biological stress levels (measured using salivary cortisol) and their relationship with quality child care. Results demonstrate clearly that children attending high-quality child care have lower stress levels across the day than do children attending satisfactory or unsatisfactory programs. Poor-quality child care is not good for children.

Stress and outcomes

Research has demonstrated over a number of years that stress impacts on long-term outcomes for both children and adults. Chronic stress has been found to be associated with an impaired immune response (Padgett & Glaser, 2003), with the individual being prone to more frequent and more severe illnesses. Chronic stress is also associated with other health problems such as hypertension, and thus higher risks of heart attacks and strokes (Kunz-Ebrecht, Kirschbaum & Steptoe, 2004), fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, and rheumatoid arthritis (Adam, 2003). Mental health consequences of chronic stress include depression (Luecken & Lemery, 2004) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Young & Breslau, 2004). Memory problems (Abercrombie, Kalin, Thurow, Rosenkranz & Davidson, 2003; Takahashi et al., 2004), behavioural and social problems are also identified as consequences of chronic stress (Adam, 2003).

Biomarkers of stress are becoming popular in research as effective, and relatively inexpensive, methods for measuring stress (Gerhardt, 2004), with cortisol being particularly popular because of its ease of collection (via saliva), storage and analysis (Gunnar & White, 2001). Cortisol is secreted to enable the individual to respond to a threat (thus is triggered by fear or uncertainty). Its role is to mobilise components of the system that facilitate a quick response to threat (such as alertness, increased breathing and heart rate) and minimise other body functions that are not essential to the immediate survival needs of the individual. Functions such as digestion, sexual behaviour, learning and rational thinking amongst others are shut down for the duration of the stress response (Adam, 2003; Gerhardt, 2004).

Cortisol levels in humans peak just after waking and decline across the day, with the lowest levels being reached around midnight (Adam, 2003). This pattern of cortisol change across the day is likely to be genetically programmed (Kunz-Ebrecht et al., 2004) and presumably evolved to ensure that humans were optimally responsive to their environment during the day when they were the most active. While it is expected that this pattern of change across the day is achieved by approximately three months, there remains a wide variability throughout childhood (Gustafsson, Allansson, Gustafsson & Nelson, 2004).

Normally, cortisol, when released into the system, is quickly absorbed or bound onto receptors so its concentration in the body declines to normal levels. When stress is chronic, high levels of cortisol remain active in the system, and this has significant biological consequences (Gerhardt, 2004). First, chronically high levels of cortisol damage the hippocampus which is partially responsible for shutting down the production of cortisol when the threat is removed. Thus damage impairs its ability to reduce cortisol, so concentrations continue to increase, leading to wide-spread neuronal damage (Monk & Nelson, 2002). High levels of cortisol also damage the amygdala which is also involved in the inhibition of cortisol production. While the amygdala can be controlled by the pre-frontal cortex, neuronal damage there, arising from high levels of cortisol, impair its ability to manage the amygdala. Consequently, it becomes very difficult for the individual to reduce circulating levels of cortisol, and these result in the long-term health, mental health, social and behavioural consequences identified above.

High levels of stress in young children are particularly of concern because a range of developing systems are put at risk. For example, the development of neurotransmitters and the still growing pathways in the brain that use them are particularly at risk when exposed to high levels of cortisol (Gerhardt, 2004). Infants are not able to manage their stress alone, and in the early years minimal levels of stress may result in high levels of cortisol. Infants are thus dependent on adults to regulate their stress levels. When this occurs satisfactorily, infants' biological stress management systems develop appropriately. For example, research demonstrates that children who are touched and soothed and who receive responsive care have increased numbers of cortisol receptors in the hippocampus (Gerhardt, 2004). When children do not receive responsive care and their stress levels are not managed appropriately, they experience chronic stress, and the consequences (biologically, behaviourally, socially, and in their health) discussed above are likely to occur.

Thus a key factor in a quality-care environment for young children is the ability of adults to manage children's stress levels. A high-quality early childhood environment is one where children's stress levels are low, and where adults are available to respond appropriately to stress reactions triggered (inevitably) by normal day-to-day events.

Stress and child care

Attending a childcare centre, and the consequent separation from parents, is a significant stress trigger in the lives of many young children. Research supports this. For example, children in child care have higher levels of cortisol than do children at home (Dettling, Gunnar & Donzella, 1999; Tout, De Haan, Campbell & Gunnar, 1998; Watamura, Donzella, Alwin & Gunnar, 2003).

The cortisol research supports other research conducted over a number of years, in a range of different care settings, reporting the negative consequences of child care attendance. For example, children who attend child care for extended periods are found to be more aggressive and non-complaint (Belsky, 1988; 1991; 1999; 2001; Belsky & Rovine, 1988), have more behaviour problems at school, and have difficulties with academic adjustment (Harrison & Ungerer, 2000), peer relationships and social skills (National Institute on Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2003a; 2003b; National Institute on Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network & Duncan, 2003). Children in poor-quality child care are found to have insecure attachments, which leaves them at risk for a range of long-term negative outcomes (Sagi, Koren-Karie, Gini, Ziv & Joels, 2002).

However, research has also consistently identified different outcomes for children who attend high-quality child care. Children in high-quality care are found to be advantaged in social-emotional and cognitive-linguistic skills (National Institute on Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2001). Many of the early childhood intervention programs, characterised by high-quality service delivery, reported a range of very positive outcomes for children, including better academic, behavioural and social skills (Schweinhart, Weikart & Larner, 1986). Unintended outcomes were also extremely positive and included higher educational attainment, higher rates of employment and home ownership, and lower rates of offending behaviour, arrests and incarceration, dependency on welfare, teenage pregnancy and substance abuse (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2000; Reynolds, Ou & Topitzes, 2004; Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993). Cortisol research supports the difference in outcomes between high- and low-quality services, with children in high-quality care showing less elevation in cortisol across the day, and sometimes declines across the day, in comparison with children in low-quality services (Dettling, Parker, Sebanc & Gunnar, 2000).

The research into outcomes of child care and quality generally uses global measures of quality. (For example, the Dettling et al. study [2000] used the Observational Ratings of the Caregiving Environment.) A range of studies has used the ECERS (for example, Watamura et al., 2003).

However, we now know from cortisol research how important it is for adults to manage young children's stress levels, and this must surely be a major influence of quality-service delivery. Evidence is beginning to accumulate about the important role attachments play in this process. Secure attachments between adult and child reduce children's cortisol reactivity and help keep cortisol levels low (Gunnar, Larson, Hertsgaard, Harris & Brodersen, 1992; Gunnar & White, 2001; Lamb, 1998). We know that warm, responsive care results in better performance on cognitive, language and behavioural tasks, and that adults who themselves are stressed are unable to offer warm, responsive care (Kim-Cohen, Moffitt, Caspi & Taylor, 2004). We also know from animal research that social support reduces stress levels, and this same response is observed in humans (Heinrichs, Baumgartner, Kirschbaum & Ehlert, 2003). Certainly it is clear that children who have insecure attachments are less able to cope in stressful situations (Braungart-Rieker, Garwood, Powers & Wang, 2001).

Quality in child care

This evidence suggests that the relationship dimensions of quality care are very important (see also, for example, Elicker & Fortner-Wood, 1995; Honig, 1993; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Manfiled-Petit, 1993). Children who are securely attached to their caregivers in child care demonstrate more prosocial behaviours, peer play, empathy and independence, and are more achievement-oriented (Mardell, 1992). Relationship dimensions are identified as components of quality-service delivery in the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) run by the National Child Care Accreditation Council in Australia (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2001a; 2001b). In addition, many of the QIAS principles not directly focusing on relationships help create contexts in which secure attachments can develop.

Research consistently identifies the importance of understanding the needs of the individual child, and providing support and encouragement appropriate for each child as fundamentally important in developing secure attachments between adult and child (Hutchins & Sims, 1999; Mardell, 1992: 1994). Children feel safe with adults who are responsive to their attempts at communication (this is often called attunement) (Lally, 1995), who demonstrate respect for each child and family (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer, 1993), and recognise the needs of children from different cultural backgrounds (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993). In addition to ethnic identity, it is important, when attempting to develop strong relationships with individual children, to address gender, social class and sexuality components of their identity (De Lair & Erwin, 2000). Through social referencing, children learn to trust and care for adults with whom their parents have positive relationships (Berk, 2002). That means that quality child care is characterised by strong and effective communication between staff and families (Hutchins & Sims, 1999). Given that positive relationships are so important (relationships between caregivers and children and between caregivers and families) stability of staffing is required. Young children are particularly vulnerable when their caregiver changes (Howes, 1992). Strong relationships take time to build and cannot easily occur when there are many and frequent changes of staff.

Extant research using biomarkers of stress has generally not been designed specifically to measure these components of childcare quality and examine how they impact on child outcomes. This study was therefore designed to investigate the relational dimensions of quality and their impact on children's stress levels (and, by implication, long-term outcomes).

Methodology

Sample

A total of 16 centres from one city have participated in this ongoing study to date (15 community-based and one private). Location was the basis for centres being asked to participate (we attempted to obtain a cross-section of the different SES suburbs—purposive sampling). All children in each centre who met the selection criteria were asked to take part. The selection criteria were that the child attended for three days a week and had parental permission to participate. This paper reports on the data collected so far for the three- to six-year-old children, of whom there were 117 recruited. All the children were in the 'kindy' group (aged 3-5) in their centre. All centres had one kindy group, thus the children came from one of the 16 kindy groups in the 16 centres.

Measures

A subset of QIAS principles was selected to rate the quality of service delivery in each group. These principles were chosen because the indications in the literature (see review above) are that relationship dimensions, and dimensions relating to meeting individual needs, are important factors in quality. The principles chosen are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. QIAS principles chosen to measure quality

Principle number	Descriptor
	Quality Area 1: Relationships with children (2 principles of 2 used in this study)
1.1	Staff create a happy, engaging atmosphere and interact with children in a warm and friendly way
1.2	Staff guide children's behaviour in a positive way
	Quality area 2: Respect for children (3 principles of 4 used in this study)
2.1	taff initiate and maintain communication with children, and their communication conveys respect and promotes equity
2.2	Staff respect the diverse abilities and the social and cultural backgrounds of all children and accommodate the individual needs of each child
2.3	Staff treat children equitably
	Quality Area 3: Partnerships with families (1 principle of 3 used in this study)
3.1	Staff and families use effective spoken and written communication to exchange information about individual children and about the centre
	Quality Area 4: Staff Interactions (1 principle of 1 used in this study)
4.1	Staff communicate effectively with each other and function well as a team
	Quality Area 5: Planning and evaluation (2 principles of 4 used in this study)
5.1	Programs reflect a clear statement of centre philosophy and a related set of broad centre goals
5.3	Programs cater for the needs, interests and abilities of all children in ways that assist children to be successful learners
	Quality Area 6: Learning and Development (1 principle of 6 used in this study)
6.1	Programs encourage children to make choices and take on new challenges
	Quality Area 7: Protective care (3 principles of 4 used in this study)
7.2	Staff supervise children at all times
7.3	Toileting and nappy-changing procedures are positive experiences and meet each child's individual needs
7.4	Staff ensure that children are dressed appropriately for indoor and outdoor play and that rest/sleep time and dressing procedures encourage self-help and meet individual needs for safety, rest and comfort
	Quality Area 8: Health (No principles of 4 used in this study)
	Quality Area 9: Safety (No principles of 3 used in this study)
	Quality Area 10: Managing to support quality (1 principle of 4 used in this study)
10.2	Staffing policies and practices facilitate continuity of care for each child

Written observations were taken in each group attended by a study child. These observations were made over the duration of the research assistant's time at the centre, which ranged from a minimum of five to a maximum of 10 days, depending on the number of children participating. These were then rated on the principles identified in Table 1 on a three-point scale (unsatisfactory, satisfactory, and high quality) as defined in the QIAS documentation (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2001a). Observations for four groups (25% of the sample groups) were given to a nationally-trained validator to rate to check accuracy of the ratings. There was 100 per cent agreement between the ratings made by the research team and the validator. Numbers of children in each of the three ratings (high quality, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory) who have complete data sets (see explanation below) and were used in the analyses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Numbers of children in each quality rating

Principle	N of children in high quality groups	N of children in satisfactory quality groups	N of children in unsatisfactory groups	Total N of children with complete data sets for analysis
1.1	39	25	3	67
1.2	40	24	3	67
2.1	39	25	3	67
2.2	26	26	15	67
2.3	29	23	15	67
3.1	35	32	0	67
4.1	33	34	0	67
5.1	28	22	17	67
5.3	42	17	8	67
6.1	32	27	8	67
7.2	32	32	3	67
7.3	28	36	3	67
7.4	36	26	3	65
10.2	33	34	0	67

Cortisol data

Saliva was collected before morning and afternoon tea over three days in one week, not necessarily consecutive days as this depended on when the child attended the centre. Collection twice a day is the minimum recommended to identify changes in salivary cortisol over time (Gunnar & White, 2001). Collection over three days allows an average to be calculated (Dettling et al., 1999; Tout et al., 1998). In this study an average morning and an average afternoon level was calculated for each child. Collection followed the procedure recommended by Gunnar and White (2001).

Procedure

Approvals were obtained from centre management (owner, management committee, coordinator—as relevant) before caregivers were approached. Once caregiver permission was obtained, parents were approached via a letter sent home from the centre. Collection proceeded only when all permissions were granted. Children for whom permission had been received, but who were reluctant to participate in saliva collection, were not pressured to do so, and those children with incomplete sets of data (that is those who did not have samples for three days) are excluded from further analysis. See Table 2 for numbers of children used in the analyses.

Analysis

Cortisol data was examined for normality: variance–covariance matrices and equality of error variances were also examined. Natural log transformations were applied to facilitate normality. A full explanation of the data screening is provided in Sims, Guilfoyle and Parry (in review) or can be obtained from the authors.

Split plot analyses of variance were undertaken for each principle to examine the impact of the levels of quality on changes in cortisol levels across the day. For the majority of the principles there were insufficient children in groups rated as unsatisfactory to include this quality level in the analyses (see Table 2). For Principles 2.1, 2.3 and 5.1 only were numbers sufficient to enable the unsatisfactory rating to be used in the analysis.

Results

Quality Area 1: Relationships with children

Figure 1 demonstrates the changes in children's cortisol in the satisfactory and high quality groups for Principle 1.1—the differences in responses were significant (F[1.58]=7.19, p=.010). In the high quality groups children's cortisol levels decreased in comparison to their levels in the satisfactory quality groups.

Figure 1. **Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 1.1: *Interact warmly.***

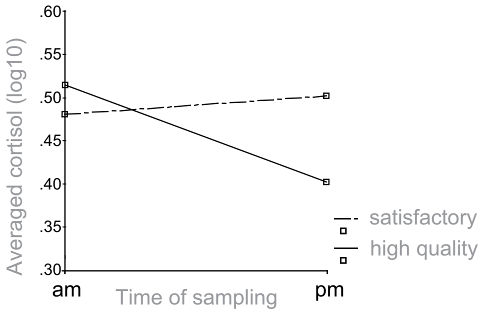
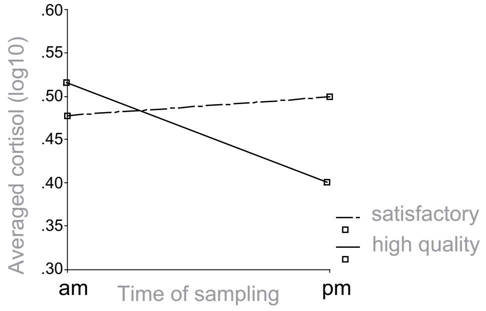


Figure 2. **Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 1.2: *Positive guidance.***



A similar pattern is evident for Principle 1.2 and this was also significant (F[1,35]=11.60, p=.002)—see Figure 2.

Quality Area 2: Respect for children

In a similar manner to that above, children in high quality groups for Principle 2.1 demonstrated a decline in cortisol, whereas those in satisfactory groups did not. This effect was significant (F[1,58]=7.19, p=.010)—see Figure 3.

Principles 2.2 and 2.3 both had sufficient numbers in the unsatisfactory group to include this level of quality in the analysis. For both principles, children's cortisol levels in the unsatisfactory groups went up, and in the satisfactory and high quality groups cortisol levels went down. This trend was significant in both cases (Principle 2.2 F[2,60]=7.58, p=.001—see Figure 4; and Principle 2.3 F[2,60]=7.5, p=.001—see Figure 5).

Figure 3. Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 2.1: *Respect and equity.*

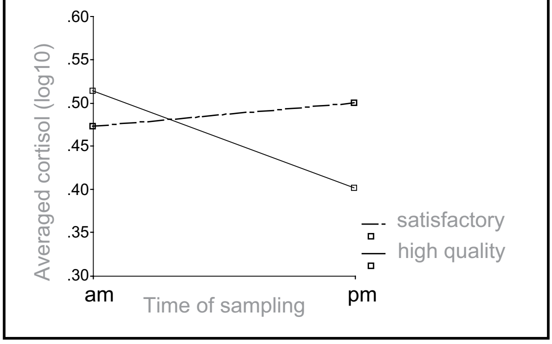


Figure 4. Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 2.2: *Individual needs.*

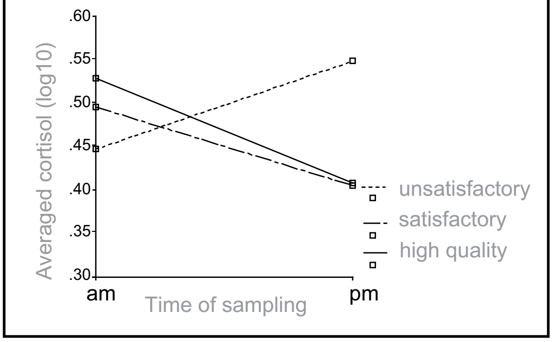
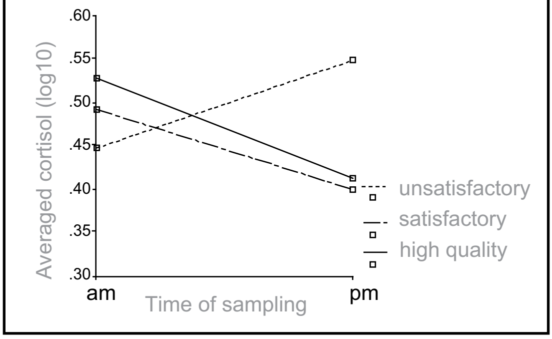


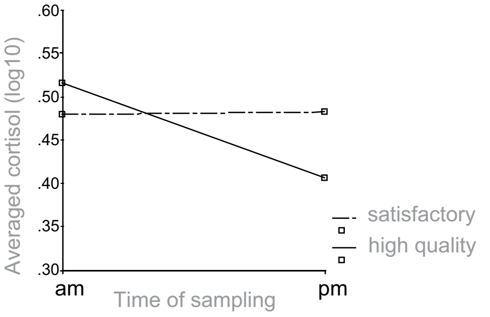
Figure 5. Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 2.3: *Treat equitably.*



Quality Area 3: Partnerships with families

Children's cortisol decreased across the day when they were in high quality groups for Principle 3.1, and this trend is not evident for children in satisfactory groups. This trend is significant (F[1,61]=5.18, p=0.026)—see Figure 6.

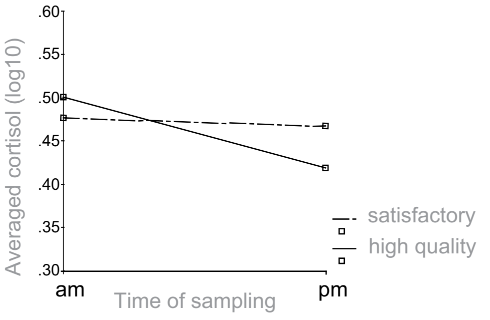
Figure 6. Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 3.1: *Family communication.*



Quality Area 4: Staff interactions

There were no significant differences in children's cortisol levels for Principle 4.1 between the high and satisfactory levels of quality—see Figure 7.

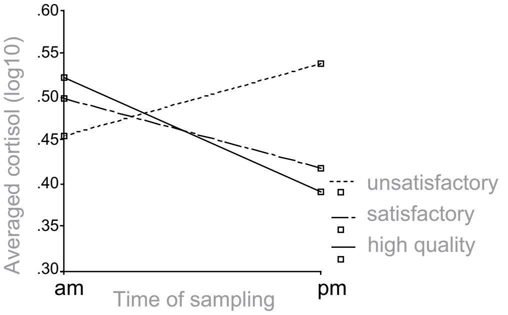
Figure 7. Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 4.1: *Staff are a team.*



Quality Area 5: Planning and evaluation

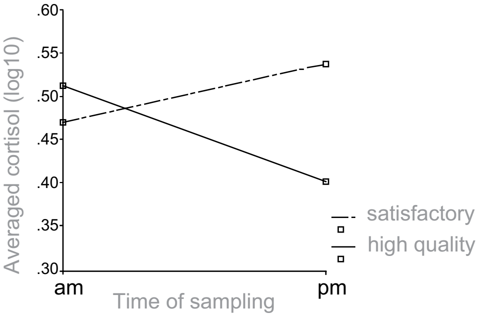
For Principle 5.1 it was possible to include unsatisfactory in the quality analysis. Children attending unsatisfactory groups for this principle had higher cortisol levels than did children in satisfactory or high quality groups. This difference was significant (F[2,60]=7.12, p=.002)—see Figure 8.

Figure 8. **Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 5.1:** ***Reflect philosophy.***



For Principle 5.3, children in high quality rooms demonstrated a decrease in cortisol and children in satisfactory rooms showed no significant change in levels. This effect was significant (F[1,54]=8.14, p=.006)—see Figure 9.

Figure 9. **Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 5.3:** ***Program for child needs.***



Quality Area 6: Learning and development

A similar pattern was found for Principle 6.1; children's cortisol levels in high quality groups declined and those in satisfactory groups showed no change. This trend was significant (F=[1,54], p=0.035)—see Figure 10.

Quality Area 7: Protective care

As above, there was a significant difference between children's cortisol levels in high quality and satisfactory groups for Principle 7.2—see Figure 11. This effect was significant (F=[1,58], p=0.035).

Figure 10. **Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 6.1:** ***Program for individual choices.***

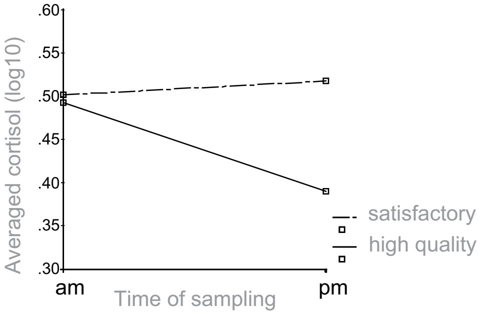


Figure 11. **Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 7.2:** ***Supervise at all times.***

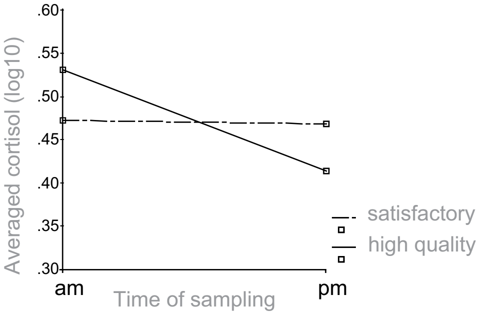
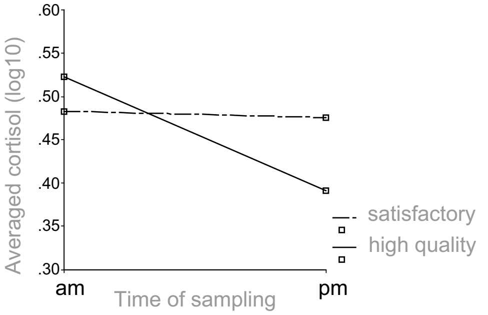


Figure 12. **Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 7.2:** ***Toileting routines***



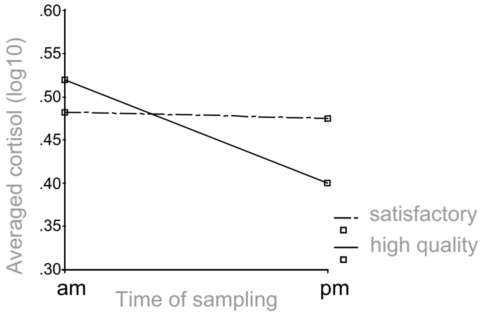
Principle 7.3 showed the same patterns, with a significant interaction between time and quality (F=[1,58], p=0.023). Cortisol levels declined in high quality groups but remained much the same in satisfactory groups—see Figure 12.

There were no significant effects for Principle 7.4.

Quality Area 10: Managing for quality

Cortisol levels for children in high quality groups for Principle 10.2 showed a decline across the day, whereas cortisol for those in satisfactory groups showed little change. This effect was significant (F=[1,61], p=0.025)—see Figure 13.

Figure 13. **Graph of interaction between time of cortisol sampling (morning and afternoon) and rating of group for Principle 10.2:** ***Continuity of care.***



Discussion

Relationships are the most important dimension of high-quality care

The majority of the principles chosen to measure quality demonstrated that higher levels of quality in care relate to better cortisol outcomes for children. The principles (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2001a) covered areas associated with relationships between caregivers and children (including treating children with respect, developing relationships with families, ensuring programs focus on children feeling safe and on meeting the individual needs of children) and management practices that ensure staff remain in their positions long enough to be able to develop and maintain relationships with children. All of these dimensions of quality are fundamental to developing and maintaining strong relationships between caregivers and children (Hutchins & Sims, 2000). This discussion will use levels of service delivery associated with lowering children's cortisol levels to identify aspects of quality child care.

Quality care that positively impacts on children's cortisol levels requires staff to consistently modify their approach to each child based on cultural background, temperament and competence. Siblings have opportunities to interact with each other during the day. Empathy and imagination are actively supported (Principle 1.1—high quality indicators). Staff are aware of their own biases, attitudes and behaviours, and reflect on their practice regularly. They encourage children to participate in decision-making, particularly around conflict management within the group (Principle 1.2—high quality indicators).

Staff engage in conversations with children throughout the day, and these are pleasant and frequent. Staff use appropriate conversation strategies for each child. Other children are encouraged to listen to peers and are encouraged to use alternative forms of interaction where this is relevant (Principle 2.1—high quality indicators). Every effort is made to pronounce children's names correctly, and to use key phrases from home languages. All children are encouraged to have positive attitudes to those from different cultural backgrounds, and families are involved in helping staff understand, and meet, different cultural expectations in routines, conversations and experiences (Principle 2.2—satisfactory indicators). Staff model respect and encourage children to treat each other with respect. Inclusive friendships are encouraged and children have opportunities to explore stereotypes, concepts of social justice, and equity (Principle 2.3—satisfactory indicators).

Families are involved in the centre, and information in other languages is available when necessary. Information is also communicated appropriately to families with low literacy levels. Staff use reflective listening with families and involve them in decisions about their child's program. The centre offers additional parent support materials such as videos, guest speakers and resource people (Principle 3.1—high quality indicator).

When staff program for children, they have a clear idea of the long-term outcomes they are aiming for. This means they have a clear understanding of the centre philosophy and have participated in its development or review within the past year. This philosophy addresses current thinking in areas such as child development and inclusive services (Principle 5.1—satisfactory indicators). Programs not only demonstrate a sound understanding of children's development but also reflect the needs and interests of each child. Children actively participate in planning play experiences and are able to choose play activities throughout the day, with opportunity to play alone, in small and large groups, and to move between play experiences as they wish (Principle 5.3—high quality indicator).

Children feel safe in the care environment and staff provide appropriate support so children can be challenged without fear. Children are encouraged to respond positively to the efforts of peers, and to support peers with differing skill levels (Principle 6.1—high quality indicators). Staff ensure that children are supervised at all times, and there is a plan in place to enable this, particularly when there are design factors that make effective supervision difficult. Supervision needs of individual children are factored into this plan (Principle 7.2—high quality indicator). Included in this supervision is the flexibility for children to use the toilet safely at any time during the day, and for younger children to undergo nappy changes when necessary. Hygiene levels are high and cases of cross-infection are monitored and addressed (Principle 7.3—high quality).

The ability of caregivers to offer this level of quality is impaired when there is high staff turnover. Relationships between adults and children grow over time, and require a commitment not only from the caregivers themselves but also from the service. Services need strategies in place to promote long-term continuity of care, and it is helpful when staff from similar cultural backgrounds to families are employed. A primary caregiver system ensures that caregivers are responsible for developing relationships with particular children and families. Along with this, staff need to support the development of relationships between their children and families and other members of staff (Principle 10.2—high quality indicators).

Where satisfactory performance is not good enough

For a number of the principles, cortisol results suggest that satisfactory performance is not good enough. In these areas, it is only when performance is at the high quality levels that children's cortisol levels demonstrate a decrease throughout the day. This applies to Principles 1.1, 1.2 (Quality Area: Relationships with children), 3.1 (Quality Area: Partnerships with families), 5.3 (Quality Area: Planning and evaluation), 6.1 (Quality Area: Learning and development), 7.2, 7.3 (Quality Area: Protective care) and 10.2 (Quality Area: Managing to support quality).

Based on these results, it would be useful for these principles to be examined with the possibility of changing the performance indicators to include a new level of performance for high quality, and the current high quality level to be identified as satisfactory. Current satisfactory levels need to be re-identified as unsatisfactory.

Implementation of the national accreditation system is claimed by NCAC to have made a major impact on quality of service delivery (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2004) and improvements in service quality are ongoing. It is important to recognise, however, that caregivers' ability to continue improving is limited by current problems in the profession. Child care is a low-status occupation, characterised by low wages and poor working conditions:

> *Most employers also acknowledge that staff can be required to work long hours in a reasonably stressful environment. It is understandable that very quickly many choose to move on to other occupations that offer better pay and/or better working conditions, including telemarketing, office work and cleaning work.* (Health Employees Superannuation Trust Australia, 2001, p. 19).

Minimum requirements for training are a two-year diploma (Murray, 1997). Use of junior workers is common (Sims, 2002; Sims, Hutchins & Dimovich, 2002). Unless there is national recognition of the importance of the early years, and the role child care plays for many families, these systemic issues are unlikely to change, and caregivers will be placed under further stress as they are required to deliver practice at levels of quality beyond their training and in conditions that do not support their efforts.

Conclusion

Young children deserve the best possible opportunities to learn and develop to their potential. In times of increasing economic pressure it is important that caregivers understand where to focus their efforts to improve service delivery for maximum impact on children's outcomes. It is also crucial that systemic changes are made so that all services operate in an environment where it is possible to expect more of caregivers, and realistic for them to deliver quality services to young children and families.

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STAFF SHORTAGES IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES:
Challenging taken-for-granted discourses

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This article is concerned with the continuing staff shortages in Australian long day care services. To expand possibilities for addressing this ongoing problem, the article advocates the use of discourse as a theoretical and practical tool for reframing discussions about staff shortages. Drawing on discourses of crisis and professionalism as examples, it suggests refocusing conversations and action around discourses of opportunity and critical professionalism, rather than the gendered professionalism traditionally associated with children's services.

Introduction

Long day care services[1] around Australia are under considerable pressure because of the cumulative impact of the increased demand for and supply of long day care places and difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified staff (Warrilow, Fisher, Cummings, Sumsion, a'Beckett & Tudball, 2002). As the employment of qualified staff is a key indicator of quality child care (Whitebook & Saki, 2003), staff shortages can undermine the quality of long day care provision.

Many Australian studies have investigated reasons for the continuing staff shortages in long day care and identified a wide range of factors contributing to high rates of attrition. These factors include the low status of the profession; relatively poor working conditions; pay that is incommensurate with the responsibilities, skill levels and qualifications; limited opportunities for career progression; the adverse effects of funding restrictions and the fragmentation of the children's services field; the amount of administrative work required; and workplace stress and burnout (Baker & Robertson, 1992; Rosier & Lloyd-Smith, 1996; Ryan, 1988; Warrilow et al., 2002; Whelan, 1993). Few of the many recommendations arising from these studies appear to have been acted upon. The effects of the Australian Government's continuing push through its industrial relations reform agenda[2] to create a more 'flexible' labour market, including pressure to accept Australian Work Place Agreements, seem likely to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the factors contributing to staff shortages (Brennan, 2004; Community Child Care Cooperative NSW, 2004).

This article is grounded in the conviction that continued inaction about staffing in children's services is not a viable option if we want a sustainable, high-quality long day care sector. The purpose of the article, therefore, is to propose a way of expanding productive possibilities for action. Although it focuses primarily on the New South Wales context where long day care services licensed for 29 or more children are required to employ an early childhood teacher with a university level qualification, the arguments proposed have national relevance. The article is underpinned by the premise that deconstructing the discourses producing and framing discussions of staff shortages—in other words, analysing what is said and not said—may enable us to shift frames of reference, disrupt habitual ways of thinking, and take effective action to overcome shortages of university- and TAFE-[3] qualified early childhood staff.

Discourses: A theoretical tool for practical action

By 'discourse', I mean a way of thinking, acting and using language and other cultural symbols to convey 'a set of values and viewpoints about the relationships between people and the distribution of social goods' (Gee, 1996, p. 132). By proclaiming what is acceptable and unacceptable, discourses legitimate certain values and viewpoints and marginalise others. Because they are intimately connected to the distribution of social goods, control over particular discourses can assist in the acquisition of money, status and power (Hughes, 2002). In the children's services context, social goods include rewarding, adequately-paid work with reasonable working conditions for staff and accessible, affordable, high-quality care for children and families.

Discourses inevitably reflect the socio-political, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which they operate (Hughes, 2002). As these contexts and circumstances change (for example, as a result of the increased demand for child care places, shifts in government policies and funding arrangements, and the expansion of the 'for-profit' children's services sector), new discourses may emerge or old ones fade. Discourses exist in relationship to each other, so when a discourse (such as child care as a business undertaking) emerges or fades it, in turn, affects other discourses (Gee, 1996; 1999). In relation to children's services, a subtle but significant discursive shift is evident in the way that mounting concerns about the 'corporatisation' of children's services are eclipsing, to a large extent, earlier concerns about 'privatisation'. Consequently, as Brennan (2004) points out, many now argue that there are no longer substantial differences between for-profit and not-for-profit services; rather they contend that 'the more important distinction is between services that offer high- and poor-quality care' (p. 216). Shifts such as these help to explain the fading of discourses positioning child care as a public responsibility and the emergence of discourses promoting child care as a private investment opportunity.

As Hughes (2002) points out, discourses 'shape who and what we are' (p. 3) and 'what we might become' (p. 4). It is imperative, therefore, that we learn to read discourses, understand how they operate, and recognise how they position us and enable us to position others. When we can deconstruct discourses in ways that enable us to look beyond the taken-for-granted, we are in a position to challenge existing discourses and invent new ones (Hughes, 2002). Davies (2004) defines this capacity as agency, or 'the freedom to recognize multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one's identity' (p. 4). In the remainder of this article, I take up the theme of agency through critical discursive work by deconstructing, challenging and offering alternatives to two discourses that typically frame discussions of staff shortages. I focus specifically on discourses of crisis and discourses of professionalism.

Discourses of crisis

Discussions about staff shortages in children's services are frequently couched in 'crisis' discourses. 'Crisis' conveys the difficulties, dilemmas and frustrations faced by some services in their search for staff. Crisis discourses can be a double-edged sword, however, because they can be manufactured and mobilised strategically to invoke particular responses, legitimise certain points of view, and justify particular actions or inaction (Thorpe, 2003). As powerful tools for politicising debates and driving changes in policy directions, they tend to be appropriated by those with vested interests and agendas.

Crisis discourses typically draw on anecdotal evidence to produce and legitimise rarely questioned 'truths'. They are characterised by sometimes deliberate semantic slippage (Thorpe, 2003) that assists in fostering uncertainty and anxiety, for example, through claims that the staffing 'crisis' may force services to close. Three recent reports—Purcal and Fisher (2004); Warrilow et al. (2002); and the 2004 Job Outlook Report (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2004)—highlight these features of 'crisis' discourses and, in various ways, proceed to challenge them.

Challenging crisis discourses

In May 2002, in response to calls to address the staffing 'crisis' in children's services, the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) relaxed its regulation that services licensed for more than 29 children must employ a qualified early childhood teacher and introduced an interim policy aimed at easing the staffing 'crisis'. The interim policy enabled services that had been unable to recruit an early childhood teacher to gain approval for up to a year to appoint a less-qualified person who was currently studying for an early childhood teaching degree or who was willing to enrol in one. By October 2003, 176 interim approvals had been granted to a total of 126 long day care services (Purcal & Fisher, 2004).

Of the 126 services gaining an interim approval, 79.4 per cent were for-profit services and 20.6 per cent were not-for-profit. As for-profit services comprised only 52.3 per cent of all services requiring an early childhood teacher, they were considerably over-represented amongst services gaining interim approvals. One provider held 31 interim approvals (17.6 per cent of all interim approvals) amongst its 65 services requiring early childhood teachers, even though it operated only 4 per cent of all services requiring teachers. Of the 39 services with multiple interim approvals, 37 were for-profit and two were not-for-profit services (Purcal & Fisher, 2004).

Interestingly, Purcal and Fisher (2004) found no consistency in the geographical distribution of interim approvals. Nor were approvals concentrated in areas that supposedly have particular difficulties attracting early childhood teachers. On the contrary, in all areas of NSW, including areas with high interim approval rates, some services employed more early childhood teachers than required. According to Purcal and Fisher (2004), these findings suggest that applications for interim approvals in some cases reflected a lack of commitment to employing teachers and an unwillingness to offer at least award pay and conditions, rather than a critical shortage of teachers per se. They concluded that, in NSW, 'genuine cases' of services being unable to appoint an early childhood teacher were rare (Purcal and Fisher, 2004, p. i).

These findings support those of an earlier related study also commissioned by the NSW Department of Community Services and undertaken by Warrilow et al. (2002). This study drew on DoCS data that indicated that, as of December 2001, the 908 long day care services in NSW required a total of 992 teachers to meet licensing requirements. Yet these services actually employed a total of 1004 teachers—12 in excess of requirements. The excess was most noticeable (39.5 teachers) in non-metropolitan areas. Metropolitan long day care services, on the other hand, had a shortfall of 27.5 teachers. In comparison, preschools employed 167.5 teachers in excess of requirements (43 in metropolitan areas and 124.5 in non-metropolitan areas). These figures indicate a tight labour market but not a 'crisis'.

A similar picture is evident in the 2004 Job Outlook Report compiled by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR). The categories, 'childcare coordinator' and 'childcare worker' are included on its National Skill Shortages List for Professionals. In NSW, however, 'skill shortages' were largely confined to Sydney, with 'recruitment difficulties' reported in some unspecified regional areas. The difference is one of degree. 'Skills shortages' occur when employers are 'unable to fill or have considerably difficulty filling vacancies … at current levels of remuneration and conditions of employment …' (DEWR, 2004, p. 12). 'Recruitment difficulties' exist when:

> *employers have some difficulty filling vacancies for an occupation. There may be an adequate supply of skilled workers, but employers are still unable to attract and recruit sufficient suitable employees. These difficulties may be due to the characteristics of the industry, occupation or employer, such as: relatively low remuneration, poor working conditions or image of the industry, unsatisfactory working hours …* (DEWR, 2004, p. 12)

The semantics here are interesting because they imply a considerable onus on employers to address problems that contribute to difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, and to respond to market forces by offering the pay and conditions necessary to attract sufficient staff. There is no connotation of employers caught up in exceptional circumstances beyond their control that warrant extraordinary measures, such as reversing existing legislation aimed at ensuring the provision of quality services or undermining current pay and conditions; in other words, no sense of crisis.

Purcal and Fisher (2004, p. 8) sum up the findings of all three reports when they emphasise that, while it is inaccurate and misleading to claim there is a staffing crisis, there are difficulties recruiting early childhood teachers for long day care services: 'There is no doubt that services compete for qualified ECTs [early childhood teachers] and that ECTs can choose where they work.' Moreover, they note that, as the demand for long day care places continues to grow, the tightness in the early childhood teacher labour market is likely to intensify.

An alternative discourse of opportunity

Seemingly intractable challenges, such as staffing difficulties in children's services, lend themselves to discourses of crisis (O'Leary, 1998). Yet they also lend themselves to discourses of opportunity (O'Leary, 1998), as two juxtaposing items in the employment section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 11-12 September 2004 clearly illustrate. A prominent front-page report focused on the poor pay and conditions of child care workers; a few pages later, an advertisement for a leadership position in a not-for-profit children's services organisation offered a $100,000 remuneration package. This juxtaposition lends itself to the question of how we might reframe the tight labour market for children's services by drawing on discourses of opportunity to 'deflect and redirect' (Thorpe, 2003, p. 147) attention from discourses of crisis.

For two reasons, I focus specifically on opportunities arising from market-driven discourses. First, market discourses are particularly salient in current debates about long day care provision, especially amongst policy makers and others in powerful positions (Brennan, 2004). Second, these discourses are not those traditionally taken up by children's services staff. Thus they provide an opportunity to explore broader discursive positionings that may be available to staff and the possibilities these might present for staff positioning themselves more powerfully than traditional discourses permit.

The labour market in children's services has long been recognised as unable to operate 'freely' or to establish 'market rates' because of its heavy reliance on government funding to pay for any wage increases (Brennan,1998; Lyons, 1996). Lyons, for example, refers to Commonwealth intervention in the 1989 award restructuring case of the Victorian award that covered employees of non-local government long day care centres. The Government refused to guarantee that additional Commonwealth funding would be made available to cover additional costs. The rapid rise of the corporate sector challenges this tight nexus between government funding and wage rates. If, as reported, some corporate providers hold expectations of making $100,000 annual profit from each of their long day care services (*The Age*, 2004), there is clearly room for negotiation on wage rates and employment conditions, especially in a context of labour shortages. Anecdotal reports of many not-for-profit services offering above-award rates and conditions also signal informal opportunities for negotiating more favourable packages than those stipulated in awards, despite serious government funding constraints. More and more services could well be recognising that 'the costs associated with paying above award rates may be lower than the costs associated with recruiting and employing new staff' (Rosier & Lloyd-Smith, 1996, p. 38).

Recent informal conversations with several about-to-graduate early childhood teacher education students at Macquarie University highlighted their awareness of their strong bargaining position. Because of their commitment to social justice activism, they were determined to teach in the child care sector. Yet they were approaching job interviews with considerable pragmatism. In their words, they were 'interviewing potential employers' and eliminating from consideration those unable or unprepared to meet the conditions they stipulated. These conditions included, but were not limited to, above-award wages; lower staff–child ratios with babies and toddlers than required by regulations; demonstrated employer commitment to providing high-quality care; and opportunities for ongoing professional development. These about-to-graduate students were clearly aware of their scarcity value in the children's services labour market and were positioning themselves adroitly in their negotiations with prospective employers.

This example illustrates the possibilities for reframing discourses of crisis as discourses of opportunity. Seizing opportunities arising from emerging and shifting discourses, however, is likely to require some rethinking of dominant discourses. The following section responds to this challenge by contesting dominant discourses of professionalism typically taken up in children's services.

Discourses of professionalism

Discourses of professionalism have been embraced by children's services staff, partly as a means of highlighting the importance of their work and thus enhancing their status and standing. This strategy has met with some success, as indicated, for example, by the inclusion of 'childcare workers' as well as 'childcare coordinators' in the 'professional' category in the DEWR's (2004) Skills Shortages list. Yet the inclusion of childcare workers in this category—along with accountants, health specialists and lawyers, amongst others—is also deeply ironic, for the pay and conditions of child care workers by no means approach those of other professionals on this list, as any examination of comparative wage rates invariably shows.

The Job Outlook Report (DEWR, 2004) indicates the average weekly earnings for all occupations expressed as 'deciles'. Each decile includes approximately 10 per cent of all occupations. Occupations in the first decile represent the 10 per cent of occupations that are the lowest-paid; those in the tenth decile the 10 per cent of most highly-paid occupations. Most of the professions listed in the Job Outlook Report as experiencing skills shortages are in the higher deciles. They include lawyers (tenth decile); engineers, accountants and secondary school teachers (ninth decile); and registered nurses and social workers (seventh decile). The average earnings of childcare coordinators fall into the sixth decile, along with occupational therapists and physiotherapists. In contrast, the average earnings of childcare workers fall into the first decile, along with podiatrists—the only two professions on the skills shortage list to do so.

A broader examination of the average earnings in all occupations shows that childcare workers, despite the importance and complexity of their work, fall into the same decile as laundry workers, domestic housekeepers, ushers and porters, and kitchen hands (DEWR, 2004). None of these occupations requires the level of training or job responsibility expected of childcare workers. Even more disturbingly, it was not until June 2003 that childcare workers in council-operated services in Victoria were able to obtain pay rates on a par with those of garbage collectors (Brennan, 2004).

In explaining this discrepancy, many commentators (e.g. Brennan, 2004; Cortis, 2004; Lyons, 2003) have noted that caring for young children is devalued because it epitomises 'women's work'. Discourses of professionalism attempt to counter this perception. In many ways, however, they further disadvantage children's services staff. Take, for example, three tenets of professionalism as typically interpreted in children's services: i) a commitment to always putting the interests of children and families first; ii) the privileging of relationship-based professionalism; and iii) the valuing of a non-hierarchical workplace culture. Collectively, these can give rise to a 'gendered professionalism' that perpetuates the status quo (Cannella, 1998).

Challenging discourses of gendered professionalism

A commitment to the interests and wellbeing of children and families traditionally underpin the ways children's services staff construct their work and professional identities. Some even claim that children's services staff have 'sublimated their own needs into an almost evangelical crusade to meet the needs of others' (Lyons, 2003, p. 1, citing Rodd, 1994). Others argue that, although well intentioned, this unwavering commitment can lead to an immediate, narrow and apolitical focus that can ultimately devalue the work of children's services staff and limit perceived options for bringing about change.

A sobering example is the failure to pursue wage increases based on connections between working conditions and service quality. Almost 20 years ago, Brennan and O'Donnell (1986, p. 77) referred to 'a growing realisation among childcare staff … that their working conditions directly affect the quality of the service they are able to provide'. As Brennan (1998, p. 130) elaborated, underpaid staff who were 'stressed because of under-staffing, because they did not receive adequate holidays or because they were unable to take time off were more likely to become ill and less able to give their best to the children in their care'. Traditional discourses of professionalism have hindered children's services staff in demanding improved pay and conditions, despite the direct link between employment conditions and the capacity to provide the high quality of care that is crucial to children's wellbeing.

In the following excerpt, Brennan (1998) further explains the unintentionally insidious effect of traditional relationship-based discourses of professionalism on children's services staff:

> *Government subsidies never entirely covered the wages of child care workers—each committee had to raise the balance from a combination of fund-raising and parent fees; they still do. Consequently, during times of economic stringency workers were sometimes asked to accept under-award wages and to forgo other entitlements in order to 'help out'. The ideology of community management—an ideology that conveys the message 'we're all in this together'—made it extremely difficult for staff to assert their rights. The close relationships often forged between staff members, the children they cared for and their parents … further complicated the picture. Most child care workers would have found it impossible to insist on their industrial rights knowing that this would result in all parents paying higher fees and some parents withdrawing their children for financial reasons* (p. 127).

In effect, traditional relationship-based discourses of professionalism can lend themselves to pitting employees' rights and wellbeing against families' rights to affordable, high-quality care. These discourses offer little guidance about how to disrupt that binary, and for the most part they fail to address how the mutual interests of children, families and staff might be supported more effectively.

In this way, relationship-based professionalism can bind children's services staff in a 'compassion trap' (Kelly, 1988). As Kelly elaborated:

> *Dissatisfied by their salaries and working conditions, as many undoubtedly were, there was no question of them using the ultimate industrial strike weapon, since the 'compassion trap' held them firmly in fear of the adverse consequences this would have on their clients* (p. 239).

Despite the changing context of children's services, which now sees at least 20 per cent of the long day care sector operating as a lucrative business venture, that same reluctance to which Kelly (1988) refers remains evident. Dissatisfied children's services staff generally prefer to leave the profession rather than participate in industrial action (Lyons, 1996). Consequently, those who remain continue to subsidise the low wages and poor working conditions that still characterise much of the sector. Lyons (2003) argues persuasively that when children's services staff 'accept such burdens as an indication of their professional commitment' they become, 'as one union official put it, "their own worst enemy"' (p. 2).

The third tenet of gendered professionalism I want to focus on here is the valuing of a non-hierarchical democratic and inclusive workplace, exemplified through teamwork and the assumption that all members of the team undertake similar roles, regardless of formal positions held and despite disparities in pay. Again, although well-intentioned, this attempt to erase hierarchical differences in the responsibilities of team members can work against children's services staff, in at least two ways. First, the indiscriminate use of the term 'teacher' can obscure recognition of higher-level skills, as illustrated in Burton and Lyons' (1998) case study of a pay case heard before the industrial relations tribunal in Queensland. Burton and Lyons (1998) report that 'the blurring of the distinction' between the roles of childcare workers and teachers in children's services enabled employers to argue that teachers were not performing 'conceptually and identifiably different' roles from those of childcare workers (p. 232). This argument was used to justify the subsequent decision that the work of teachers in long day care did not warrant parity of pay with teachers in the school sector. The discrepancy in pay is substantial. An analysis of respective award rates shows that, as of January 2005, teachers in their first year of employment with the NSW Department of Education and Training will earn $7,515 (19.4 per cent) more per annum than their counterpart with the same qualifications employed under the state award covering teachers in long day care services. This discrepancy increases to $10,470 (21.6 per cent) at the highest incremental step.

Second, expectations that childcare workers undertake substantially the same work as better-qualified, more highly-paid, staff further ingrains inequities and exploitation. This is particularly concerning given the size of the earnings differentials between childcare workers and qualified early childhood teachers. Under the relevant NSW state awards, an experienced and qualified Advanced Child Care worker, as of September 2004, is paid $7,738 per annum less than a first year qualified teacher in long day care and $26,897 less than a teacher on the final step of the incremental scale.

Discourses of professionalism that foreground the interests and wellbeing of children and families, relationships with clients and colleagues, and non-hierarchical team work are seductive and self-affirming. But they can also be damaging if they perpetuate gendered expectations of self-sacrifice that disadvantage children's services staff in the labour market. The following section considers alternative discourses of professionalism that might enable children's services staff to position themselves more powerfully than dominant discourses of gendered professionalism currently permit. It explores two interrelated questions: How can traditional notions of a self-sacrificial gendered professionalism be resisted? What might alternative discourses of professionalism look like in practice?

Alternative discourses of professionalism

In constructing and reconstructing our professional identities we draw on discourses we perceive to be available to us (Hughes, 2002). Identifying, making explicit and problematising these discourses is central to recognising and resisting discourses of self-sacrificial gendered professionalism. Resistance will involve questioning how we are positioned by these discourses and how we use them to position others. In addition, we will need to ask who benefits from these discourses and who is disadvantaged by them (Hughes, 2002). Resistance will also mean grappling with difficult questions, such as: *How do we reconcile our commitment, as a profession, to social justice with the continued gendered exploitation of children's services staff?* Resistance might also necessitate drawing attention to the ironies of children's services staff supporting families so they can obtain economic and social benefits that could well be beyond the reach of the children's services staff themselves. As a childcare worker interviewed for the Sydney Morning Herald report referred to earlier commented: 'Here we are busy looking after everyone else's families so they can support themselves and have a nice family life, and we can't afford to do it ourselves' (Long, 2004, p. 1).

Challenging dominant discourses and countering them with alternatives will be likely to create tensions as competing discourses struggle to coexist (Raddon, 2002). These tensions can be productive as they create spaces in which to explore new possibilities. As Smulyan (2004) comments, it will be a matter of working 'within and around existing discourses' and 'sometimes pushing the boundaries' of what may initially seem feasible or even desirable (p. 232). Above all, hooks (2000) reminds us, 'we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality' (p. 110).

Imagining new possibilities for reconceptualising professionalism need not mean rejecting the ethics of care underpinning traditional discourses of gendered professionalism in children's services. Rather, it could entail expanding discourses and repertoires of care to include the political as well as the personal; the critical as well as the relational; and the theoretical as well as the practical. Indeed, it is this blending of the personal, political, relational and critical that offers most scope for fashioning a new form of professionalism in children's services (Meagher & Parton, 2004).

Critical professionalism can best be summed up as a commitment to closely linking caring (for self and others) with critiquing social, political and economic structures, with the intention of contributing to the creation of a more just and equitable society (Cannella, 1998; Meagher & Parton, 2004; Smulyan, 2004). Presumably, that is how many children's services staff currently conceptualise their work. Dillabough (1999) cautions, however, that while many women see themselves as agents of change, structural constraints of which they may not be fully aware often impede them from achieving the agency they claim to possess. Her comment seems particularly pertinent to women in children's services. Critical professionalism involves identifying and strategically negotiating these structural constraints in order to eventually dismantle them. It is this emphasis on critical action (Barnett, 1997) that distinguishes critical professionalism from the gendered professionalism traditionally found in children's services.

What might critical action look like in practice? The possibilities are many but could coalesce around identifying new political and industrial avenues to address the economic exploitation of children's services professionals.

Politically, critical action could involve:

- mobilising the support of parents, an enormously powerful political resource, to demand changed funding arrangements that would provide reasonable wages and working conditions *without* making child care unaffordable—and refusing to accept the dichotomous argument that only one or the other is possible;
- engaging governments, policy-makers and powerful others in conversations using *their* preferred discourses;
- mastering multiple discourses that have not traditionally been part of the children's services lexicon and refining our ability to switch discourses as circumstances demand, in other words developing a strategic 'discursive dexterity';
- challenging colleagues' acceptance of relatively poor conditions as a tangible demonstration of their professionalism (Lyons, 2003).
- taking a determined stand not to shelter governments, employers and parents from the consequences of inadequate government funding.

Industrially, critical action could mean:

- recognising that industrial relations tribunals in Australia are conservative institutions, and finding ways to challenge their 'established ideas about what is skilled and valuable work' in children's services (Cortis, 2000, p. 53).
- working closely with unions, academics and other potential 'expert witnesses', to identify and convey in discourses recognisable to industrial relations tribunals the complex skills required of staff in children's services, including the higher-order skills associated with high-quality caring;
- documenting efforts children's services staff have made to improve their wages and conditions as well as strategies that have proved successful;
- working with employers, unions and academics to document case studies of services that offer staff above-award wages and conditions, including the decisions that have enabled these services to do so, and the impact on service viability and on staff recruitment and retention;
- voicing and acting upon concerns about employment conditions, rather than accepting them as an inevitable part of working in children's services, or electing to leave the profession because of them (Lyons, 2003).
- rejecting the use of 'teacher' as a generic term for all long day care staff regardless of their formal qualifications.

Translating many of these possibilities into practice will require the facility to work across a range of discourses and to transcend the relatively narrow discourses traditionally associated with professionalism in children's services. In doing so, it will involve acknowledging tensions arising from vested and conflicting interests, and participating in complex and challenging debates.

Take, for example, the difficult and highly political question of 'Who *should* pay for high-quality children's services staffed by reasonably well-paid staff?' Given Australia's relatively low tax overall base[4] (OECD, 2004), one option would appear to be to increase taxation to fund greater social infrastructure investment, including higher wages for children's services staff. Presumably, however, this option would be unpalatable to governments, and most likely also to parents, thus limiting opportunities for mobilising parent support. Another option could be to fund higher wages for children's services staff through taxation reform that addressed the skewed effects of high marginal rates of taxation and other distortions in the current tax regime, which again could be unpalatable to many politicians and parents. To press for such reforms, children's services staff would need to forge alliances with groups similarly concerned with taxation reform and lack of investment in public infrastructure—a further, broader form of critical action than the examples outlined above convey.

Conclusion

hooks (2000) writes that, in general, 'we are better at naming the problem than we are at envisioning the solution' (p. 70). Although she was not referring to children's services, her comment is apt. This article has sought to expand possibilities for envisioning solutions to the problem of staff shortages in Australian long day care services, using discourse as a theoretical tool as a basis for practical action. It has focused on two discourses that frequently frame discussions about staff shortages—discourses of crisis and discourses of professionalism.

In challenging these discourses and suggesting alternatives, I have adopted a deliberately provocative stance. While not denying the difficulties of effecting changes of the kind we are seeking—essentially a transformation in the ways the care and education of young children and those who are involved in its provision are viewed—I believe it is crucial to take an optimistic view. Such changes are not impossible. Indeed, it can be easy to overlook that, until the early 1990s, teachers in New South Wales long day care services had slightly higher pay rates than those in schools. A return to that situation, and a substantial improvement in the wages and conditions of childcare workers, is not inconceivable.

It is clear that current employment conditions *must* and *can* change to make the long day care sector in children's services a more attractive employment option. If we are to bring about this change, we cannot afford to stay within familiar and comfortable children services agendas and conversations. On the contrary, we must develop and refine the skills needed to position ourselves effectively in a much broader range of discourses and learn to manoeuvre strategically and adroitly within and amongst these discourses, including those favoured by government, policy-makers and some employers. This article has offered some suggestions for how we might (re)focus our efforts to do so.

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Endnotes

[1] Long day care services provide centre-based care and education for prior-to-school aged children. They open for a minimum of eight hours per day, five days per week, and 48 weeks per year.

[2] The Australian Government's reform agenda aims to introduce a single national industrial relations system, reduce the power of trade unions, and replace collective bargaining with individual contracts between employers and employees. The intention is to enable downward flexibility in minimum wage rates.

[3] TAFE-qualified staff have a two-year diploma or associate diploma qualification from a College of Technical and Further Education. These qualifications generally enable entry with advanced standing into university undergraduate early childhood education degree programs.

[4] In 2001, Australia had the sixth-lowest tax base as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) of the 30 OECD countries, at 6.8% below the OECD average.

THE COMMUNICATION ACCRETION SPIRAL:
A communication process for promoting and sustaining meaningful partnerships between families and early childhood service staff

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Findings of an investigation of parents' perceptions of early childhood service quality identified limitations in staff–parent communication which inhibit the development of a shared parent and staff approach to children's care and education. These findings have informed the development of an accretion model of communication for crossing the boundaries which hinder the promotion of relevant communications. The Communication Accretion Spiral process explains how the accrual of information and knowledge of parents and staff is built up over time. These communications are the basis for shared understandings of children's learning and development across home/service contexts, promoting and sustaining meaningful communications which lead to informed shared decision-making.

Introduction

Good parent–staff relationships in early childhood services essentially underpin all that defines quality and yet, as Hughes and MacNaughton (1999; 2002) have said, these relationships are often the most problematic. While interest and rhetoric have focused on issues relating to parental involvement and effective interactive communication, much of the research highlights not so much the benefits but rather the concerns associated with it (Hepworth Berger, 2000; Johnson, 1996). However, if the inclusion of families in decision-making is an integral component of quality services and the service's role is to complement families in their child-rearing roles (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Doherty-Derkowski, 1995; Powell, 1998), then early childhood staff need to reconsider the processes and content of communications used.

The Communication Accretion Spiral, an interpretative model for promoting communication between staff and parents, has been developed as a result of implications drawn from the findings of an investigation designed to explore families' perceptions of 'quality early childhood care and education' (Elliott, 2003).

Approach to the investigation

Many parents in Australia today use early childhood services to assist them in their parenting roles by caring for and educating children too young to enter the formal school system. Yet little is known about the criteria these parents use when selecting services for their children, how they as consumers assess services, and if or how they are able to influence the quality of the services they use.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) explain how links between any two child-rearing settings must be supportive to positively impact on the child when in either setting. Yet there has been limited investigation about parents' experiences and understandings of how home and services collaborate to develop a shared approach to young children's care and education.

Research question

Powell (1998) notes that parents and teachers don't always view the world through the same lens. Hence this research sought to identify how parents perceived opportunities available to them to contribute to and engage with staff in the development of a shared approach to their children's care and education.

Method

Three separate but interrelated phases, using three distinct data collection methods, sought information from a total of 188 parents, representing 23 long day care services within the Greater Western Sydney geographical area. In phase one, nine parents were interviewed and asked to report on their experiences and expectations of early childhood service provision. Based on interview data, a questionnaire was developed and disseminated. A total of 143 parents completed the questionnaire, while the final phase involved the participation of 36 parents in one of five separate focus group discussions.

All participants were recruited by individual service providers and were either asked in person or responded to an invitation posted in the foyer of services. All services were accredited by the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) as being of 'high quality'.

Analysis

The investigation used both emergent qualitative processes (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and descriptive statistics (Huck & Cormier, 1996) for data analysis. To profit from the unique strengths inherent in both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the three approaches to data collection were designed to complement each other. Each approach corresponded to a particular phase of the investigation, which in turn influenced each subsequent phase.

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured informal interviews and comments recorded on questionnaires. Focus group discussions were also analysed to determine trends and patterns of responses occurring across the various parent groups (Krueger, 1994). Quantitative methods provided a process for assessing the internal consistency and reliability of questionnaires and for univariant analyses of data.

Findings

Parents identified a broad range of communication strategies implemented by staff, however they felt that communication processes and the opportunities for engagement were too limited. Such limitations prevent parents from supporting their children's early education and inhibited attempts to make links between the service and the child's home. While staff provide information about the daily routines in which children engaged, this information was insufficient to enable development of continuity for children between service and home contexts. Further to this, parents believed they were unable to influence changes which could promote such continuity.

Reciprocal engagement is a tenet central to the changes which need to be considered in order for staff and parents to collaboratively contribute to children's care and education in early childhood contexts. A communication process that is purposefully developed for mutual benefit (child, parent, staff) requires parents' voices to be openly influential. In this way parents and staff could jointly engage in a process of reciprocal engagement based on committed communication practices.

Background to development of the Communication Accretion Model

Regulations for the licensing of early childhood services and Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) criteria correspond in part to Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs in terms of meeting children's physiological, safety, security, belonging and affection needs. According to parents, however, information about children's safety, health and wellbeing form the mainstay of staff communications. While much has been done to promote and improve the standard of quality care and education for young children and their families through the inclusion of parents in decision-making; according to parents, communication is not yet open enough (Elliott, 2003).

Bromer (1999), Coleman (1997), Morrison and Rodgers (1997), and Powell (1998) talk about the importance of collaborative relationships between parents and staff to promote the development and maintenance of links between homes and settings. Yet parents in this investigation said current communication practices are too limited.

While parents appreciate the importance of providing information to staff about their families' needs, cultural values and children's health histories, they pointed out that such information-sharing was a 'one way' process. Staff did not extend information to parents about the service's philosophy and educational focus or explain how these were implemented. This knowledge was important to parents because it enabled them to understand their children's whole-of-life experiences in both service and home contexts. The current practices limited the degree to which parents could involve themselves in service decision-making and consequently limited their influence on the care and education provided for their children.

These parents' experiences appear contrary to the goals established by the NCAC, where quality services are said to work in partnerships with families in order to achieve continuity of care for children (NCAC, 2001, p. 7). The investigation reported that many parents were unable to enter into a shared, meaningful dialogue with staff because staff (whether intentionally or otherwise) limited the amount and kind of knowledge they gave to families.

Studies have highlighted how 'staff–parent relationships are suffused with knowledge–power relationships' (Ashton & Cairney, 2001; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2002, p. 14). In staff–parent relationships, understanding the other party is often fraught with these knowledge–power problems, as each believes they have the relevant significant background knowledge to be able to make decisions. Parents are aware of their child on an intensely subjective basis while early childhood–trained teachers have formal theoretical knowledge and experience. Newman and Polnitz (2001) refer to this as 'informed knowledge' which staff use to understand all children in their class group. Hughes and MacNaughton (1999) explain how this concept of 'expert knowledge' creates tension between families and staff.

For all parties, communication is a developing and evolving process. Not only does it involve crossing invisible boundaries—which divide the previously dichotomised realms of the private home and family on the one hand, and the professional, school and teacher on the other—but it exposes one to the other.

Reciprocal engagement is a principle central to changes which need to be considered in order for staff and parents to collaboratively contribute to children's care and education. A communication process purposefully developed for mutual benefit (child, parent, staff) requires parents' voices to be openly influential in the services children attend. Through such engagement, parents and staff jointly engage in a process of reciprocity based on committed communication practices.

However, reciprocal engagement cannot occur until the boundaries between service and home, and staff and parents are crossed. Hughes and MacNaughton (2002) highlighted some of the entrenched problems and barriers hindering effective communications between staff and parents. While it is noted that parents disclose information about their children, only rarely are staff perceived as willing or sufficiently interested to exchange and negotiate additional information about children with their parents. For the most part, staff were seen to 'inform' parents. They told parents that their decisions were based on their professional knowledge and reflected appropriate behaviour.

Hughes and MacNaughton (2002) have suggested that staff are unwilling to credit parents with holding valuable knowledge about a specific child which is at least as valuable as their professional and expert knowledge about children in general. It is a direct challenge to staff and a threat to their status, so staff use systematic and theory-based models to create 'truth' about children. Parents, however, recognise that the 'truth' about their particular child is that which they experience on a day-by-day basis.

The implications of the understandings gained in Hughes' and MacNaughton's investigation are far reaching and overlap significantly with findings reported by Elliott (2003). With this in mind, a model for achieving better communication between staff and parents has been developed.

The model

The model intentionally promotes and supports effective communication between staff and parents to generate intersubjectivity or shared knowledge about individual children. The process is designed to move staff beyond simply providing a service that addresses children's basic needs of safety, health and wellbeing, to that of a service promoting and providing care and education designed to enable all children to reach their fullest potential.

The design uses a sequential developmental process according to and incorporating parents' identified need for information and shared communication. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1968) provided a structure upon which to base the model, as it corresponds both to interpretations of 'quality' and parents' desire for information about children's experiences when attending services.

Further to this, Maslow's hierarchy provides a discernible pathway for communication which can enable parents and staff to cross the invisible boundary operating between them. As already noted, children's basic needs (physiological needs, safety, security) are being met in most services, and communication with parents on the whole appears to be effective in these areas. While there are numerous formal and informal channels of communication available for interaction between parents and staff, it is not so much 'how' communication is effected but 'what' is being communicated and the lack of opportunity for reciprocal engagement that is the crux of the communication issue for many parents. Such knowledge, of course, has the power to impact on the development of the higher order attributes or 'growth needs' as noted by Maslow (1968) and which in this model will lead to reciprocal engagement between staff and parents.

Children need more than adequate food, warmth and shelter, safety and security, as well as love and a sense of belonging and affection. To develop as a whole person requires a great deal more (Maslow, 1968). Individuals must acquire self-respect and a healthy self-esteem, based on a sense of being valued by others, in order to reach their fullest potential. It is to this point that all attempts at providing 'quality' in early childhood services must be directed to ensure the best possible outcomes for all children and their families. In order to achieve the kind of 'quality' implied by Morgan (1996) as 'excellent', communication designed to promote and foster self-actualisation must be better effected.

Parents' desire for reciprocal engagement through communication would afford them a greater understanding of the philosophies underpinning the offering of particular experiences, the value of certain aspects of play and in particular how all this relates to their individual children. Such communication and engagement requires staff to allow parents to cross over the invisible boundary into the realm of knowledge held sacred by professionals.

Grey (1999) speaks of holding a vision, which in turn can inspire people to focus on goals and energise them to work proactively for their achievement. The movement towards a vision is not necessarily linear—it can be achieved through a cyclical process where knowledge accrued is developed and new knowledge is gained, extending the cycle into a spiral that is built up over time. In this model, information and knowledge about children, families and staff is shared and accrued over time. It begins with the exchange of the most basic, specific information which is built upon to the point where effective, honest communication results in trusting interactions at a broader and more abstract level between individuals. Accretion occurs as parties reflect on knowledge, use it to inform experiences and dealings with each other, gain new knowledge, reflect further and continue, albeit non-sequentially, through this communication process.

Underpinning any model devised to support a proposal for enhanced communication must be a genuine desire on the part of the participants to ensure its success. Traditional models of staff development that offer 'training' in the implementation of somebody else's ideas or a 'top-down' model have been found to be of limited use (Abbott et al., 1999; Lieberman, 1994). More effective models involve all participants, in this case both parents and staff, and require honest appraisal of current models, reflection of their efficacy, a commitment to change and an evaluation and reassessment of progress made (Abbott et al., 1999; Daley, 1999; Lieberman, 1994; Marieneau, 1999; Pascal, 1999; Ritchie, 1999; Woods, 1994). In this way, not only does communication ensure that the knowledge held by all parties is shared for the ultimate good of the children in care, but it ensures that problems, previously associated with much tension in settings, are aired and, hopefully, reduced.

The model has been constructed with the promotion of reciprocal engagement and shared understanding in mind. While it necessarily describes a process in a linear fashion, it is recognised that daily encounters with others are rarely linear; but rather weave and twist, influencing further communication. Such communications and interactions help with the building of trust and mutual understanding which, when interwoven with knowledge developed over time, grows and strengthens to the point where intersubjectivity becomes a characteristic of the interactions.

The model is based on a spiral process of initiated conversations. These conversations are, in the beginning, focused on communication exchanges about children's physiological and safety needs. As parents and staff develop a shared relationship around the child, the exchange of information begins to change. Conversations move beyond the child's physiological needs and state of wellbeing into communications about the child's individuality and the family as a whole.

As parents share more information and become more aware of staff's relationships with their children, another change occurs. Parents begin to appreciate the relationships their children have with staff. As well, staff appreciate parents' insightful contributions about their children and begin to recognise the importance of children's family contexts. Partnerships then develop, built on a mutual acceptance of the shared responsibility undertaken for children's care and education. This is an integral step in the reciprocal engagement process because boundaries between professional and personal realms are now bridged, enabling reciprocal engagement to develop.

Communications become more specific and focused as parents and staff seek and share information to gain greater understanding about home and service contexts and the inherent values of each. As boundaries fade, information is freely shared, promoting mutual understanding between staff and parents about children's care and education. In this way, both parties work together in a spirit of mutual respect to forge links between service and home contexts. The reciprocal engagement generated through the stages of communication impacts on outcomes for children and ultimately influences 'quality' in early childhood settings.

As noted, the model developed is linked to Maslow's hierarchy—levels in the hierarchy correspond to communication foci raised by parents. At the base level Maslow notes the importance of satisfying the physiological, safety, love and esteem needs before being able to move forward and attain growth at an intellectual level. Using this sequence for initiating staff–parent communication, the best outcomes for children can be promoted. The model identifies five stages of communication. These are:

1. communication about physiological and safety needs;
2. communication about belonging needs;
3. communication about esteem needs;
4. communication about the need to know and understand; and
5. communication based on self-actualisation promoting reciprocal engagement.

The first two stages exemplify the type of communication parents reported. Communication about these needs is identified by QIAS and regulations (NCAC, 2001; New South Wales Government, 1997). Elliott's (2003) investigation has suggested that the third stage, 'communication about esteem needs', is not always as effective as it might be, as parents are not encouraged to feel motivated, nor are they equipped to feel confident about contributing to programs.

Stages 4 and 5 deal with communication leading to growth. Problems associated with this area have been identified in the literature (Elliott, 2003; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001) and the model has been designed to address the way communication is effected and what is being communicated between parents and staff at this level.

Stage 1: Communication about physiological and safety needs

The first stage reflects either initial enquiry or enrolment. This stage corresponds to numerous aspects of the communicative process currently evident in early childhood settings. Initial information is shared as parents and staff begin a relationship. It can grow and develop to provide the best possible experience for child and family alike; or communication may be truncated at this point, with little further communication promoted. Either way, communication is likely to have significant consequences for the child. Failure of each party to impart knowledge to the other at this stage is not only likely to result in serious health, legal or social problems by breaching regulatory requirements (New South Wales Government, 1997), it fails to address principles of 'quality' (NCAC, 2001).

Table 1 displays the nature of communications engaged in by parents and staff at the initial stage of the Communication Accretion Spiral.

Figure 1. **Model of Communication Accretion Spiral**

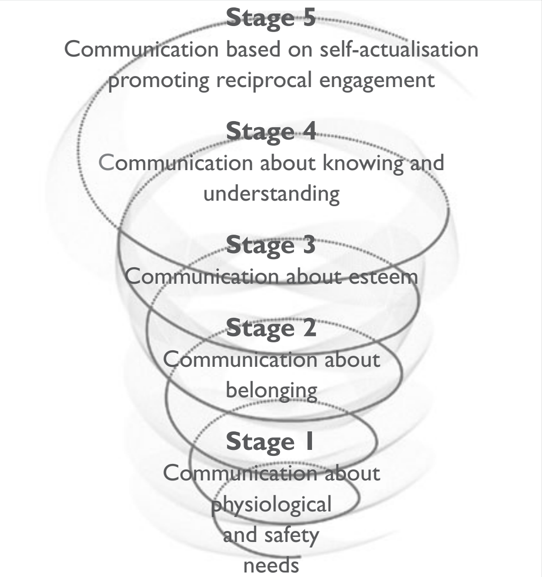
Stage 5
Communication based on self-actualisation promoting reciprocal engagement
Stage 4
Communication about knowing and understanding
Stage 3
Communication about esteem
Stage 2
Communication about belonging
Stage 1
Communication about physiological and safety needs

Table 1. **Stage 1—communication about physiological and safety needs**

Communication (parent)	Communication (staff)	Desired outcomes
Inform staff of child's: • health; • dietary/feeding patterns; • sleeping; • toileting; and • specific requirements. **May request information about:** • safety; • program; • hours; • other requirements; and • fees etc.	**Inform parents of mandatory regulations governing:** • health issues; • professional conduct; • meals and rest; and • toileting. **May request information about:** • specific needs; • contact details; and • limited access.	• Children's basic needs accommodated satisfactorily in settings • Families' satisfaction provides security for children • Families feel secure in knowing centre is meeting their needs • Staff feel secure that they have important health-related information from parents about child

As shown in Table 1, the focus of parents' communications at this level relates to ensuring their children's health and safety is assured. Staff correspondingly provide information to parents about legal and policy responsibilities such as immunisation details required by services, and provide information about menus, and service procedures and practices. Satisfactory communication at this stage ensures that the level of quality established by QIAS and regulations is maintained, resulting in the satisfactory management of children's early experiences.

Stage 2: Communication about belonging

The need for a sense of belonging and love is a strong human characteristic shared by children, families and staff alike. It is essential for children—to attain independence and a sense of autonomy to help them achieve their potential; and necessary for parents—for the motivation and sense of ownership required to contribute effectively to services. Communication at this stage builds on what has been learned about the staff and service regarding physiological and safety aspects in Stage 1.

Table 2 shows Stage 2 of the Communication Accretion Spiral, where communications change form as information exchanged is developed at a more personalised level.

Table 2. Stage 2—communication about belonging

Communication (parent)	Communication (staff)	Desired outcomes
Inform staff of child's: • characteristics; • strengths; • interests; • likes, dislikes; and • cultural/religious values. **May share information about:** • home life; • child's family and friends; • family's interests; and • community events.	**Demonstrate to parents:** • interest in child; • affection; • building on family information; • importance of child in setting; and • respect for parents' needs/ culture. **Communicate:** • aspects of child's socialisation; and • about cultural/ religious events.	• Shared appreciation of child's individuality. • Acknowledgment and support to address family's unique needs • Child's sense of belonging within service context is enhanced • Families' culture/ religion/ family values and opinions are acknowledged and respected • Staff's professional knowledge appreciated and respected

Table 2 shows how parents and staff, once they engage in a more personalised information exchanges, become more informed and knowledgeable about the child within each other's context. This occurs as parents share their insights into their children's individual personalities and introduce information about family units. In response, staff should acknowledge and respect information given by parents and provide more detailed information about the child as an individual within the service context (Davis, 1997).

For staff to better understand children and their families, and for parents to gain confidence in staff interactions with children, communications must convey a sense of genuineness and a desire to really understand and respect others' points of view. A sense of belonging or being loved rarely develops at a first meeting, therefore communication must be honest, reciprocal and circular if it is to be of value and unfold over time.

Stage 3: Communication about esteem

This next stage of communication constitutes a sharing of information between the two parties, relevant to practices within the dual contexts of the child's life. Within these conversations, both parties seek information to better understand each situation, thereby promoting continuity between the service and the child's home.

Table 3. Stage 3—communication about esteem

Communication (parent)	Communication (staff)	Desired outcomes
Share with staff, child's: • Triumphs and successes and skills and strengths; and • happenings and events in child's life. **May share and/or request information about:** • parenting strategies; • aspects of behaviour; • ways to encourage child; and • ways to help child feel confident and motivated.	**Share with parents:** • evidence of child's strengths and skills; • positive happenings and events in child's day; • experiences which foster sense of self; and • social aspects. **May request information about:** • way child learns at home; • behaviour; and • child's confidence in social and learning situations.	• Confident, motivated children able to take risks • Social children • Parents who feel their opinions are valued and respected • Parents and staff working together to promote child's self-esteem

Table 3 displays the nature of communications engaged in by parents and staff at Stage 3 of the Communication Accretion Spiral.

Table 3 identifies the communication between staff and parents which now has a focus on exchanging individualised and specific information about the child within each context. These conversations contribute to each parent's positive sense of self as exchanges with staff become more informative for both parties.

A sense of being loved and belonging goes some way toward the development of a healthy sense of self and positive self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to the way we evaluate our own characteristics, skills and abilities (Slavin, 1997), and develops primarily as a response to the way we perceive we are valued by others. It develops over time and is contingent on the response of others in various situations. Its importance for parents, staff and children cannot be overemphasised, as it not only influences motivation for a range of learning and related tasks, but has significance for the way people communicate with one another—the predicament raised by parents in the investigation.

The value placed on ourselves by others is a result of prolonged interaction, where strengths, attributes and skills can be discerned, analysed and critiqued. Communication between staff and parents is essential to enable children's esteem needs to be met. More than that, however, communication is essential for the meeting of parents' own esteem needs. Effective staff and parent communication based on mutual respect and trust encourages both parents and staff to see themselves and each other as valued contributors to children's care and education and does much to allay many parents' anxieties about leaving their children.

Stage 4: Communication about knowing and understanding

The next shift in the development of communications between staff and parents occurs at Stage 4. At this stage staff and parents are motivated to initiate 'boundary crossing' in order to reach out and connect with each other to promote meaningful communications. Parents will be encouraged to ask questions about children's learning and planned educational experiences, while staff will be able to gather pertinent information about children from their families.

Elliott (2003) identified how a lack of communication resulted in parents not knowing or understanding the purpose of their children's experiences nor the learning opportunities promoted. Such a lack of understanding has a detrimental effect on parents' ability to contribute to their children's daily experiences and prevented even the most elementary questioning because parents do not know which questions to ask (Elliott, 2003).

Table 4 highlights how staff and parents, when seeking information and providing insights to each other about children, cross the boundaries separating the family and

Table 4. **Stage 4—communication about knowing and understanding**

Communication (parent)	Communication (staff)	Desired outcomes
Parents cross the boundary into the professional realm when they express their desire for knowledge about: • educational value of experiences; • philosophies underpinning events at centres; • links between theory and practice; • how own children's actions can be interpreted effectively; • how they can learn to maximise their children's potential; and • how they can contribute effectively to policy and decision-making	**Staff must cross the boundary between professionalism and family life to share with parents:** • the educational value of daily experiences; • how experiences from home are valued and how new experiences at settings build on these; • how parents' ideas are valuable, respected and necessary to support children's learning; and • their own knowledge about children in general and specific children. **Staff need to seek and acknowledge:** • parents' contribution; • parents' knowledge of own children; and • parents' ideas and suggestions	• Confident, motivated parents armed with the type of knowledge which enables them to support their children at home based on information from settings • Continuity between service and home • Parents confident to contribute in an informed manner to the philosophy, goals and planning at the centre • Parents confident to contribute to the evaluation of the service • Strong relationships between parents and staff as they work together to provide best outcomes for children • Shared understanding (intersubjectivity)

professional realms. Staff must recognise that, while their professional opinions and knowledge are valuable (and indeed many parents stand in awe of teachers), this knowledge must be shared with parents in ways that are meaningful to them and relate specifically to their children. It is this type of communication that empowers parents to support their children's education and enables them to contribute to decision-making in services.

Through the previous four stages of communication, parents and staff have engaged in a process of accretion or an accumulation of knowledge as they exchanged information and developed new understandings by building on what was previously known. Reciprocal relationships are established as boundaries are crossed.

Stage 5: Communication based on self-actualisation promoting reciprocal engagement

Only when staff and parents communicate and establish relationships built on mutual respect, honesty, trust and a recognition of the valuable role each has in the care and education of young children can self-actualisation occur. According to Maslow (1968) it is at this point that individuals accept themselves and others, are open and spontaneous, yet deep and democratic in their dealings and interactions. Self-actualised people are creative, enjoy a sense of humour and a sense of individuality and independence. Table 5 gives an overview of the positive outcome of parents' and staff's communications resulting in reciprocal engagement and self-actualisation.

Table 5 identifies the outcomes possible for all parties, once parents and staff cross the invisible boundaries and share their knowledge. Communication for self-actualisation would mean that staff were no longer fearful of having their professional judgement undermined, or of losing the sense of power inherent amongst holders of knowledge. Communication for self-actualisation would also mean that parents were no longer merely the recipients of prescribed information, but would enable full understanding for those who chose to pursue it.

Communication for self-actualisation would then ensure that children be given the best opportunities to maximise their potential. Such engagement then promotes a culture of service excellence where such excellence would be far in excess of the 'quality' prescribed by NCAC (2001). In this case 'quality' is exemplified by mutual respect, openness, generosity and genuine friendship on the part of all stakeholders in their shared approach to the care and education of young children.

Table 5. Stage 5—communication based on self-actualisation promoting reciprocal engagement

Mutual respect, honesty, trust, appreciation and recognition of knowledge and roles within contexts

Outcomes (parent)	Outcomes (staff)	Desired outcomes
• Parents' understanding of the educational value of experiences and philosophies underpinning events at centres enables them to contribute effectively to planning and decision-making in settings • Can recognise links between theory and practice as they relate to own children • Trustful of staff with information to maximise their children's potential • Can build on understanding of practices in settings to support children's care and education at home	• Unequivocal support from parents • Friendship and respect • Better relationships with families based on greater understanding • Greater knowledge of unique characteristics of children • Improved outcomes for children • Shared responsibility for planning • Higher standards of quality	• Shared understanding (intersubjectivity) between staff and parents • Planning, programming and evaluations underpinned by an understanding about home, culture and values • Children's experiences meaningful to them • Continuity between service and home

Interactive partnerships between families and staff result in reciprocal engagement: the outcome of the crossing of boundaries (Davies, 1997) between teachers' professional and parents' personal worlds. The model reflecting a communication accretion spiral discussed here demonstrates how the best possible outcomes may be achieved for parents, children and staff alike, while exemplifying a level of quality not generally able to be achieved by an adherence to regulations or participation in QIAS alone.

Irrespective of this, there are limitations with the model, as with any model, as no one concept holds true for all people. Moreover, as Moss (1994) and Farquhar (1990) have noted, 'quality' in early childhood centres and in respect to education is subjective, value laden, socially and culturally constructed, and dynamic rather than an objective reality applicable to all. For this reason, communication between parents and early childhood centres must be effected with consideration of the unique characteristics of each setting and each individual within settings.

Implementing the model

To promote the kind of change which will ensure growth for children and families alike, staff and families together must work toward a shared focus. As previously noted, effective communication is achieved by adopting strategies and practices which are multifaceted and interwoven. They need to build on and be contingent upon influential interactions between persons. Like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, interaction generally results from communication at a base level, upon which further communications grow. Unlike Maslow's hierarchy of needs, however, shared ideas, concerns and understandings can arise at any stage. As a result, some relationships will develop spontaneously while others require effort and commitment. In early childhood services the natural barrier to communication accorded by the provider–client, professional–lay, teacher–parent role dichotomy needs to be overcome to ensure excellence in care and education for children.

For collaborative dialogues to succeed, stakeholders need to be open to innovation and willing to consider new possibilities designed to increase and create more effective communication systems and to engage participants in debate. Implementation of such plans must include:

1) a joint evaluation of current practices;
2) identified priorities and action based on the evaluation;
3) implementation of new ideas and strategic plans; and
4) reflection and review of the process (modified from Pascal, 1999).

Self-reflection and review of processes, Marienau (1999) says, empowers stakeholders as they learn from the experience. It serves to strengthen their commitment to better practice. Self-assessment enhances higher-order thinking skills (enabling them to set and monitor goals, seek and offer feedback, enhance problem-solving, decision-making and critical thinking skills) necessary for functioning in the workplace. As well, self-assessment fosters self-perception and authority which is demonstrated in a shift from an external to an internal locus of control (Marienau, 1999).

As staff and parents communicate, the accretion of knowledge supports the dialogues between them. Shared communication for shared understanding necessitates the engagement of both parties in the self-reflective process so that strengths and shortcomings of each in respect to communication can be discussed. When this occurs, collaboration between parents and staff promotes mutual agreement on goals and objectives upon which to base their model for shared communication and decision-making.

While this model is not in itself an answer to the identified issues related to staff–parent communications, it does provided a basis for staff discussion to initiate dialogues with families which are guided and purposeful. A carefully considered approach designed to encourage purposeful discourse with families is an important step towards the shared approach of care and education for under-school-aged children.

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