Judith Duncan, Pat Irvine, Shelley Auld, Tracy Cross, Heather Fagan, Toni Seiuli, Christine Smith, Angela Sutton and Suzy Weir (University of Otago/University of Canterbury and the Dunedin Community Childcare Association).

Homebased early childhood education (family day care)—The Visiting Teacher's role in improving Educators' practices: A Summary

Abstract

This project investigated the role of Visiting Teachers (formerly called coordinators) in improving the quality of Educators' practices, and children's learning outcomes, in the homebased settings supervised by the Dunedin Community Childcare Association (DCCA). The Visiting Teachers in the project engaged in two action research cycles, one per year, examining how the different activities, tasks, professional development workshops and Visiting Teacher-Educator interactions enhanced educational and care practices in the homebased settings. We focused on support services within the homebased early childhood education and care setting (the Visiting Teacher as well as professional development provided by the DCCA) as international research has shown this role of Visiting Teacher is both a key in providing the support for improved Educator practices, and a link between the training, professional development and successful learning outcomes for children. The two-year project identified three main factors that influenced the practice of the Visiting Teachers and matched those of the Educators: informality, intentionality and isolation. The three 'I's became both the process of our research and the final conclusions. Addressing these factors within the Visiting Teacher and Educator settings and pedagogy directly impacted on the learning experiences for the children, the Educators and the Visiting Teachers.
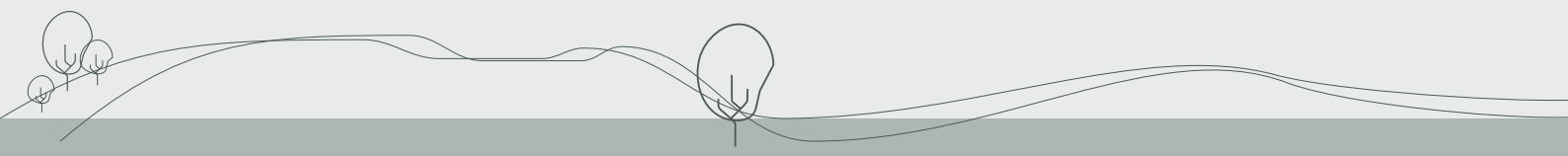
Context

Homebased early childhood education (also internationally known as family day care) is a formally recognised early childhood education setting in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Ministry of Education (2003) describes it as "an early childhood service provided for preschool children either in their own home or that of another adult caregiver (referred to in this text as Educator)" (Wright, 2005, p. 1). The change of terminology from "family day care" to "homebased early childhood education" in Aotearoa New Zealand is in recognition of the change in perspective, from a social welfare background to its integrated position within early childhood education (White, 2005). Nationally, the growth of Homebased Services has been significant in the provision of early childhood education within Aotearoa New Zealand. In 1990 the Ministry of Education identified 40 services, which by 2007 had risen to 227 (a 467.5 percent increase). Likewise, this increase is mirrored by the increase of children attending these services, with 1611 enrolments in 1990 increased to 11,073 in 2007 (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Homebased early childhood education (ECE) is a unique provision of early childhood education and care for children and their families. The relaxed home setting enables an educator to build intimate relationships with the children and their families, in a model not dissimilar to extended family. These intimate relationships are also built up between the children in a homebased setting. The children in these settings experience their day through the flexible schedules of a home environment and the usual activities of a family; for example, household tasks, shopping, outings in the community etc. At the same time the Educator is required to meet the goals and learning outcomes for children through the delivery of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996).

At the time of this project the DCCA had four licensed and chartered childcare centres and four homebased ECE networks/schemes. The Association employed four Visiting Teachers (Homebased) who supported 75 Educators in providing education and care in their own homes. An Educator provides early childhood education and care in a home environment, with a maximum of four children under the age of 6 years at any one time.

The Association is still run by an elected group of parent representatives and a Director who is the professional leader of the organisation.

Each Visiting Teacher in the DCCA has the responsibility for a network of Caregivers/Educators in a geographical region, designated as the Visiting Teacher's "Scheme". Each Visiting Teacher oversees and supports each Educator in their homebased setting, ensuring that the best quality early childhood experiences are provided for each child in the setting, and ensuring that all appropriate professional and legal standards are met in each setting.

Research Aims and Objectives

Within this context we undertook a 2-year investigation to:

- Examine the roles and relationships between the Visiting Teachers and their Educators;
- Investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the current roles and relationships between each Visiting Teacher and her group of Educators;
- Explore different ways of improving the effectiveness of the role of the Visiting Teacher with her group of Educators;
- Assess the impact of the role of the Visiting Teacher on teaching practices of Educators and learning outcomes for children;
- Evaluate the systems in place that support the role and the professional development of the Visiting Teacher from the Dunedin Community Childcare Association;
- Evaluate the workshops and professional development programmes provided to the Educators and the roles undertaken by the Visiting Teachers.

We framed our research around our research questions:

1. What difference does the role of the Visiting Teacher make to Educators' practices and children's learning outcomes?
2. How can Visiting Teachers improve Educators' practices and learning outcomes for children?

Research design

Our framework for investigation has been action research methods (Brown & Jones, 2001; Cardno, 2003; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; MacNaughton, 1996, 2001; Ponte, Ax, Beijaard & Wubbels, 2004), drawing on a range of different investigatory tools to capture as many perspectives and ranges of information as possible.

The Visiting Teachers in the project engaged in two action research cycles, one per year, examining how the different activities, tasks, professional development workshops and Visiting Teacher-Educator interactions enhanced educational and care practices in the homebased setting. In Year One we focused on examining each Educator's home environment as the teaching tool for Educators. In Year Two, as a result of our findings from Year One, we shifted our focus to building communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) for the Educators and the Visiting Teachers.

Our project involved four Visiting Teachers each year (with the change of staff this involved seven Visiting Teachers over the 2 years), 12 Educators in 2007, and 15 Educators in 2008.

We used a "mosaic" of methods (Clark & Moss, 2001) to gather data, choosing the most appropriate for each setting and the issue under consideration. Over each

cycle the Visiting Teachers wrote in reflective journals, increased their range of professional reading (journal articles etc), undertook videoing of each other's visits with Educators, and shared analysis of all the data gathered from the Educators and their settings. Each Educator also kept a journal where they recorded reflections on each Visiting Teacher's 3-weekly visit. The Educators also engaged in reading and attending the professional development workshops as part of the DCCA and extra ones provided as a key aspect of this project. Judith (as the University researcher) interviewed each Educator at the end of each cycle. Professional development workshops played a large part of our intervention with Educators. Within the project we ran workshops on a range of topics from play-based ideas (Trough Out Day, Environments) to professional issues (Employee Assistance Programme) for the Educators and these were seen to be supportive for enhanced Educator practices.

The following findings were generated through the cycle analysis that occurred as part of an action research project. Throughout and at the end of each cycle the Visiting Teachers, with Judith, analysed their gathered data and compared this data against the research questions, thus generating conclusions for each cycle and for investigating in the following cycle. These findings over the two years are summarised below.

Findings

Our findings are presented here under three key themes: Informality, Intentionality, and Isolation. These three themes arose from both years of data gathering and analysis from the Educators and the Visiting Teachers' investigations.

Informality

The homebased setting presents a complexity that centre-based services do not face on a regular basis. These complexities centre on the notions of blending a relaxed, informal setting of the "home" with the challenges of delivering a professional curriculum that is expected of all early childhood education, engaging in professional training and regular professional development. The relationships that Educators have with the children's parents and with her Visiting Teacher demonstrate clear examples of these tensions. The Visiting Teachers expressed concerns at a sense of "my home, my castle" that could arise in Educator's responses to suggestions for changes, while a couple of the Educators in the project identified frustration that the Visiting Teachers did not seem to "appreciate that this is a home environment and not a centre. We do things differently". These tensions, while unique to the "home" can be a signal of discord in a relationship but also signal the difficulties with a sense of "ownership of place", which is usually dissuaded by those working in an early childhood centre.

The Visiting Teachers pointed to the importance of re-establishing the relationship with the Educator during each 3-weekly visit by sharing informal conversation about the Educator, herself and her own family, before beginning the "teaching and learning" conversations that involved the formal monitoring and assessment component of the visit. This tension was identified by each Visiting Teacher.

Interestingly, the Educators were very clear about the purpose of the Visiting Teacher's visits — these were seen as a source of both personal support and professional support. However, in contrast to the views of the Visiting Teachers *all* the Educators identified that it was the professional discussion that mattered most, in particular reinforcement of things going right and new ideas to work with.

Intentionality

> To be intentional is to act purposefully, with a goal in mind and a plan for accomplishing it … Intentional teaching is not an accident … Intentional teachers use their knowledge, judgment, and expertise to organize learning experiences for children … When an unexpected situation arises, as it always does intentional teachers recognize a teaching opportunity and are able to take advantage of it. (Epstein, 2007)

Increasing the intentionality of the work of the Educators with the children had been a goal of the Visiting Teachers as they planned the readings and professional development workshops for the Educators. Importantly, the focus on the action research model of — examine, plan, act, reflect, and evaluate — supported the Visiting Teachers own intentionality. Using the action research approach in this research the Visiting Teachers were able to use the knowledge that they gained through the process to consolidate and improve practice for long-lasting change. Their own increased intentionality in their visits to the Educators, their follow-up conversations (providing resources etc) and the structured professional development sessions all provided a strong framework for increasing the Educators intentional teaching practices.

Isolation

Our preliminary analysis from Cycle One indicated that professional isolation was a concern for both the Educators and the Visiting Teachers. The homebased sector is one where both the Educators and the Visiting Teachers' work is separated from other early childhood professionals and this "isolation" became the next consideration for us in our research. The Visiting Teachers developed individual plans for each Educator, which involved providing individualised options for building networks and establishing a "community of practice" for all the Educators in the research; for example, creating workshops for Educators to meet others, and visiting other early childhood centres or another Educator's setting. The notion of a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998) is a place where knowledge is used in action and developed into forms that are acceptable within specific communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As Edwards (2000, p. 187) describes "communities of

practice have shared histories and values and as a result ascribe common meanings to objects and events".

We were interested in both the particular construction of homebased communities of practice, and to use this notion of a "community of practice" to support networks and quality teaching practices for Educators. We saw a new and different community of practice emerge as Educators networked via buddy visits and attended professional development with other participants. In the children's profiles we saw extended use of theoretical knowledge. In conversations with Visiting Teachers the Educators were beginning to challenge their own and others' thinking about children.

Our findings had expected and unexpected outcomes. We had not expected the Visiting Teachers' isolated way of working with Educators to have been so central to the practices of both the Visiting Teachers and the Educators. By working in isolation both the Visiting Teachers and the Educators had been able to continue working in the same way, without lifting their gaze to consider other possibilities or ways of thinking and being with children, that is: "This is how we've always done it." Hence, while isolated practice had been usual daily practice within the Visiting Teachers' schemes, there had been no reason to expect that anything other than good teaching and learning was occurring. Over the course of the research we deliberately challenged this professional isolation of both Visiting Teachers and Educators. Together the Visiting Teachers and the Educators began to examine their own and each others' practices and became enthusiastic about new ideas, new ways of looking at the same thing, and most of all, building new support mechanisms and networks to break down the isolation of working "alone" with children, or "alone" with individual Educators. As a Visiting Teacher summed up:

> The Educators' positive views for working as a *community of practice* were reflected in their work with children and then their documenting of children's learning in profile books. The profile books reflected positive outcomes for children. The Visiting Teachers found themselves being more focused and intentional in their practice and became a stronger *community of practice* through the process. They realised that they too work in isolation and enjoyed the opportunity to work more closely together sharing information, challenging and questioning each others thinking through robust professional discussion and debate. The Visiting Teachers saw the value of multiple perspectives and have now included buddy visits as part of their self-review and self-reflective practice. These findings have influenced our work with all Educators creating a wide community of practice and learning. A positive process indeed!

Conclusion

These processes have now been built into the DCCA's ways of working, and it is envisaged that constant review and revision of these will continue to enhance the ways that Visiting Teachers make a difference to Educators teaching and learning practices with children.

References

Brown, T., & Jones, L. (2001). *Action research and postmodernism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Cardno, C. (2003). *Action research: A developmental approach*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical. Education, knowledge and action research*. East Sussex: The Falmer Press.

Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2001). *Listening to young children: The mosaic approach*. London: National Children's Bureau Enterprises Ltd.

Edwards, A. (2000). Research and practice: is there a dialogue? In H. Penn (Ed.), *Early Childhood Services: Theory, Policy and Practice* (pp. 184–199). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Epstein, A. S. (2007). *The intentional teacher: Choosing the best strategies for young children's learning.* Washington: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacNaughton, G. (1996). Researching for quality: A case for action research in early childhood services. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 21*(2), 29–33.

MacNaughton, G. (2001). Action research. In G. MacNaughton, S. A. Rolfe & I. Siraj-Blatchford (Eds.), *Doing early childhood research* (pp. 208–223). Crows Nest, Australia: Allen and Unwin.

Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum. He Whāriki Matauranga mo nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa*. Wellington: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education. (2008). *ECE Time Series 2007*. Wellington.

Ponte, P., Ax, J., Beijaard, D., & Wubbels, T. (2004). Teachers' development of professional knowledge through action research and the facilitation of this by teacher Educators. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 20*, 571–588.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

White, J. (2005). *Public spaces in private places: Quality review in the context of family day care* (Occasional paper No 16). Wellington: Institute for Early Childhood Studies.

Wright, L. (2005). *Early childhood curriculum in family day care: People, places and things* (Occasional Paper No 17). Wellington: Institute for Early Childhood Studies.