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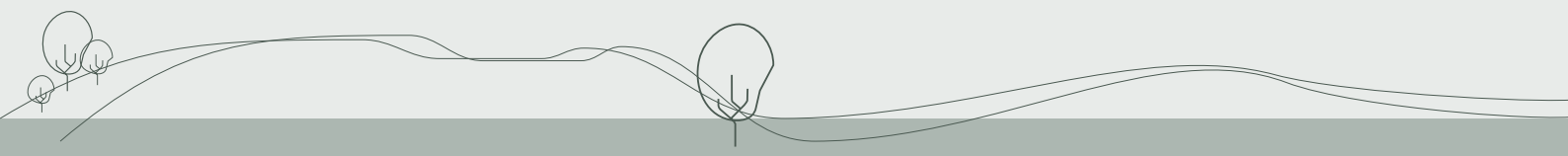
Training on the job: How do home-based co-ordinators support educators to notice, recognise, and respond?

A summary

This project was undertaken jointly by three co-ordinators from Hamilton Childcare Services Trust and a researcher from the University of Waikato. It focused on exploring the impact of the informal training and professional development that co-ordinators provide for home-based educators in an early childhood service. It aimed to identify factors important in helping educators to recognise and support children's learning.

Hamilton Childcare Services Trust Home-based Childcare is a teacher-led early childhood service. All home-based educators are supported by co-ordinators responsible for ensuring they are implementing *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996) and providing individual plans and assessment for children.

Since 1996 educators have been required by legislation to complete the first module of the Family Daycare Certificate in order that services obtain a higher rate of Ministry of Education funding. Co-ordinators have been required since January 2005 to be registered, qualified, early childhood teachers. Educators provide a home-like (as opposed to a centre) environment and are responsible for both the children in their care and the activities of running a home, such as shopping, cooking, and gardening (Foote & Ellis, 2003). These activities provide rich learning opportunities if educators are alert to their potential and can recognise and respond appropriately to children's learning. Co-ordinators provide ongoing training and professional development for educators to assist those with only basic training to provide quality interactions and learning outcomes for children. The work of co-ordinators is therefore central to the learning of children receiving home-based childcare, and this research provided important insights into their role.





Research objectives

The research project aimed to identify and document the ways in which home-based childcare co-ordinators support educators caring for children in their own homes to notice, recognise, and respond to children's learning. The research objectives were to:

- investigate co-ordinators' practice
- document educators' understanding of children's learning
- discover how one impacts upon the other.

There were three research questions:

1. What are co-ordinators doing to support educators to notice, recognise, and respond to children's learning?
2. What changes are evident in educators' practice as a result of what co-ordinators do?
3. What factors seem to be important in this process?

Research design and methodology

The project documents the work of three co-ordinators over a seven-month period, including working one-to-one with educators in their homes, running professional development workshops and follow-up meetings, and engaging in other informal discussions. The co-ordinators documented their actions, using field notes to capture what they did with, and for, each educator, along with their observations of the educator's practice.

Co-ordinators analysed changes made by educators, along with their own perceived reasons for such change, to create a case study of each educator. The university-based researcher interviewed educators at the beginning and end of the project and the data were used to create a similar case study from each educator's point of view. The researcher compared the two perspectives, and any inconsistencies were explored and further information sought to explain them. These detailed case studies were then analysed for emergent themes. Questionnaire data from families and managers provided other sources of evidence regarding changes that had been made.

Participants

Each of the participating co-ordinators works with a network of up to 20 educators. All were invited to participate in the research, and from those who volunteered each co-ordinator randomly selected 5–15 educators in total. Their backgrounds varied, ranging from new educators with only 5 months' experience to experienced educators who had been in the role up to 17 years.

Findings

The research provided insights into the ways in which co-ordinators provide informal training and professional development for educators to enable them to notice, recognise, and respond to children's learning. The data suggest that through providing this informal training co-ordinators are able to support quality outcomes for children.

The co-ordinators offered a range of "training-on-the-job" opportunities aimed at challenging and extending each educator's current understanding and practice, at their own pace. This training included many of the features of effective professional development outlined in the best evidence synthesis (BES) on professional development (Mitchell & Cubey, 2003) and was consistent with international recommendations summarised by Everiss and Dalli (2003) in that it was:

- sensitive to the educators' needs both as caregivers and adult learners
- designed to acknowledge and build on their experiential knowledge base
- differentiated (in the one-to-one support) to their different levels.

Using both educator and co-ordinator assessments of the educators' practice, four main areas of change were identified:

- portfolio work
- noticing, recognising, and responding to children's learning
- developing a community of learners
- confidence.

Different educators experienced different inspirational points. The main influences in enhancing their practice over the course of the year had been:

- the support of the co-ordinators
- networking with others
- the workshops.

Educators appreciated the practical support provided by co-ordinators. The workshop was a key factor, but a range of other forms of practical assistance was mentioned, including role modelling, offering help and suggestions to tackle specific issues, and talking about portfolios and planning.

Educators identified warm, respectful, supportive relationships between themselves and co-ordinators as an important factor in enabling them to learn from the co-ordinators. In turn, they enhanced both their relationships with children and their ability to notice, recognise, and respond to children's learning.



The impact of educators' networking with each other, both socially and professionally, was an unexpected finding. Educators supported each other, shared ideas and expertise, and reflected on children's learning. Analysis of change was specific to the individual educators, each of whom was at a different point on their own learning journey when the research began, and so the nature and degree of change varied. For some educators, major changes in their practice prior to the research period were consolidated during the period. For many educators it was a combination of factors that made a difference. As Lily noted:

A combination [of influences] because if we hadn't had the workshops, we wouldn't have had the discussions so it's like a stepping stone because everything that came out of that was positive so it's a combination. You can't define. You can't just say, "It's talking to the others", because we wouldn't have been together if it hadn't been for the research and the willingness to talk about it and the fact that this was a place [in which] we felt safe enough to say, "I haven't got the hang of it . . ." (Int. 2 p. 9)

The nature of the changes made by educators reflects the different categories of an accomplished teacher discussed by Shulman and Shulman (2004). These are being:

- ready (possessing vision)
- willing (having motivation)
- able (both knowing and being able to do)
- reflective (learning from experience)
- communal (acting as a member of a professional community).

The improvements in portfolio work and noticing, recognising, and responding to children's learning were unsurprising outcomes. What was unanticipated was the manner in which the shared focus on children's learning, the educators' own learning about their practice, and the co-ordinators' interest in both—and their own learning about ways to enhance the former—fostered a new sensibility, a sense of being what Brown et al. (1993) described as a "community of learners" and Shulman and Shulman (2004) call the communal aspect of the accomplished teacher that includes "deliberation, collaboration, reciprocal scaffolding, and distributed expertise" (p. 265). These aspects of the findings are of particular interest as they indicated how initial professional development inputs could lead to much deeper and long-term changes to practice.

Overall, the factors that make a difference related to the *interweaving* of the practical support provided by co-ordinators and the supportive relationships they developed with the educators (along with workshops and networking), and the aspects of teaching identified by Shulman & Shulman (2004)—being ready, willing, able, reflective, and communal. The respectful and

supportive relationships that were a key factor in enabling the educators to learn from the co-ordinators in turn enhanced both their relationships with children and their ability to notice, recognise, and respond to children's learning. In addition, networking between educators was both a change and a reason for change, as the networks that developed enhanced practice further.

The co-ordinators in turn were energised and excited by the work that their educators were doing, appearing to strengthen these reciprocal relationships further as co-ordinators received affirmation of the work they had been doing, and greater insights into their own role. The work of educators with children was therefore at the heart of a nested set of reciprocal relationships, and learning outcomes for children appeared to be enhanced when there was a positive learning environment for all.

The findings revealed the complexity of the co-ordinator's role, and the ways in which their work is affected by a web of reciprocal relationships. When these relationships are balanced and synchronised, and there is suitable inspiration, a community of learners can develop. Brown et al. (1993) suggested that, ideally in such a community, all participants become acquirers, users, and extenders of knowledge in a sustained and ongoing process, and this appeared to be the case for the educators and co-ordinators in this project.

Limitations

In any research, the data gathered will be influenced by the preoccupations and agendas of the participants, including the researcher(s) (Holliday, 2002). While the focus for this study arose from the co-ordinators' interest in documenting aspects of their practice they felt were working well, the random selection of educators to provide feedback, and the inclusion of the university-based researcher in the data collection and analysis, helped overcome this potential bias. Nevertheless, the data from the educators was gathered from those who volunteered to participate and who may have been more motivated to engage in the training opportunities provided.

Conclusions

Training is widely discussed in the literature and clearly related to quality outcomes for children in early childhood settings. However, the picture in regard to home-based settings is less clear. The results of this study suggest that with the initial training that is required, followed by ongoing support and professional development from trained co-ordinators, educators can be supported in noticing, recognising, and responding to children's learning, and in documenting this learning. It is important that any discussions about qualifications and training for educators take into account the small group size and home settings in which these educators work.



Co-ordinators provided training tailored to each educator's stage in their learning journey. This approach addressed not only the induction and support of newcomers, but also the ongoing development of more experienced educators.

Professional development for educators needs to reflect what their role entails. It must be meaningful, useful, accessible, and carefully planned. Small group workshops and one-to-one follow-up appeared to be a powerful method of providing support. These small groups facilitated networking between educators which, in many cases, further enhanced their practice.

The findings provide an important message to service providers and managers: not only should co-ordinators be selected carefully, but they also need to be supported to do their jobs. It is important that co-ordinators have time to develop successful relationships with their educators. Providing co-ordinators with opportunities to undertake professional development enables them to further their own knowledge base and keeps them inspired. Their knowledge and passion is then passed on to educators, which in turn influences what happens for children.

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