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"HOW IS MY CHILD DOING?": Selected case studies of how childcare centres meet the DoPs requirement to discuss children's progress with parents

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The 1989 New Zealand educational reforms heralded major changes in all sectors of education. These changes included the introduction of a charter, which is essentially a contract, between the Crown and each individual education service. The Early Childhood Charter Guidelines: A Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices, promulgated by the Minister of Education in December 1990, became the basis for the contract document required of early childhood centres which sought to become chartered centres in receipt of government funding.

The Early Childhood Charter Guidelines, commonly referred to as the 'DoPs', include over 60 requirements and objectives which early childhood services must meet as part of their contractual obligations (Meade and Dalli, 1991). Included in these is a requirement that centre personnel make provision at all times 'for parents and families to discuss their child's progress and be informed about their child's daily programme' (Ministry of Education 1990, p.3).

The meaning and intent of the above requirement was investigated in a study carried out in the second half of 1994 in which government agency, parent, and centre personnel understanding of the requirement was investigated. The study was carried out as part of the requirements of the Master of Education programme in which the first author was enrolled. This paper focuses on data from interviews with parents and teachers which show how teachers in eleven childcare centres translated the requirement into manageable systems within their centres. The paper also illuminates the practices that developed in the centres from these systems and the extent to which the requirement became a tool for the development of parent-teacher partnerships in the education and care of children.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study adopted a case study approach in exploring the experience of eleven centres in responding to the DoPs requirement to 'make provision at all times for parents and families to discuss their child's progress and be informed about their child's daily programme'. Data gathering mechanisms included interviews with teachers, parents and other professionals followed by analysis of the interview data. Principles of qualitative research were employed in the data analysis. Some quantitative analyses were also done to enable comparisons between the experiences of different centres. A literature review was undertaken to explore the philosophy underpinning the requirement, to provide an historical perspective on the issue and to relate the study to current scholarship.

The study took place in the greater Wellington area; of the eleven centres in the study, six were privately owned and operated and five were community-based with parent management committees. All eleven centres provided full day care and education.

One teacher, usually the supervisor, was interviewed from each of the eleven centres using a structured interview sheet. All teachers interviewed were women and all held recognised early childhood qualifications. On average, three parents from each of the eleven centres were also interviewed. The parents were selected by the teachers, usually the supervisor. According to the teachers, the parents were chosen on the basis of their likely interest and time availability. Although this may have biased the sample in favour of parents who had a sound relationship with staff, the diversity of parent comments suggested that a balance of parental views was obtained. One centre put a notice on the parent noticeboard to ask for parent volunteers for the study. Of the 31 parents interviewed, 29 were mothers and 2 were fathers.

The above data form the basis of this paper. Additional aspects of the study, which will not be reported on here, include interviews with personnel from the Ministry of Education, the Early Childhood Development Unit, Wellington College of Education early childhood advisory support staff and a questionnaire sent to Education Review Officer reviewers to determine government agency expectations of the requirement in practice. Analysis of the Wellington district Education Review Office early childhood reports and reviewer worksheets (field notes) also occurred over a six month period, from July to December 1994. The purpose of this analysis was to explore how the Education Review Office evaluated the centres' compliance with the requirement. Some reference to this analysis is made in the following section.

THE REQUIREMENT TO 'DISCUSS PROGRESS'

'Discussion'

Discussion implies a mutual exchange between equals about a topic in which both have an understanding and interest. For there to be a requirement for discussion suggests the ideal of a parent-teacher relationship based on partnership. In New Zealand, the concept of partnership in early childhood education has largely been promoted through reference to the works of Bronfenbrenner (1979), Tizard, Mortimore & Burchell (1981), Pugh, Aplin, De'Ath and Moxom (1987) and Powell (1989). Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that partnership is based on the principles of 'mutual trust, positive orientation, goal consensus and balance of power and reciprocity' (p.214).

Early childhood services have a strong tradition of communication between teachers and parents at what has come to be known as transition time. However, research has shown that while this practice is vital for building relationships between parents and teachers, it is generally not an adequate forum for in-depth discussion of children's progress (Smith and Hubbard, 1988; Tizard, Mortimore & Burchell 1981). Tizard et al argue that most transition time conversations consist of greetings and comments about meals, health and physical and emotional well-being. Parents, it is asserted, 'generally wanted to know if the child had been happy and good'. Smith and Hubbard found that most conversations between teachers and parents at transition time focussed on play activities, arrangements for dropping off and picking up children or problems at the centre.

The analysis of Education Review Office reports and worksheets carried out in this study indicated that after the introduction of Assurance Audit reviews in 1992, the Education Review Office began to evaluate the practice of informally chatting with parents about their child's day at transition time, as non-compliant in relation to the requirement to 'discuss progress'. Informal chatting continued to be seen as valuable, in that it fostered a sense of security and trust between teachers and parents and was regarded as a key factor in relationship-building and maintenance. However, while it could be claimed that the practice created a warm protective parent-teacher relationship, such as espoused by Malaguzzi (1993), it could not be described as 'partnership' based on reciprocity and information sharing.

This study explored each centre's system for 'discussing progress' and what constituted best practice in terms of the requirement. The concept 'partnership' is examined in greater depth in a later section of this paper.

'Progress'

The concept of 'progress' in early childhood education is problematical. Progress implies sequential development or learning and suggests advance in children's presenting behaviours and knowledge over time. Moore (1982 cited in Athey, 1990, p.102) says that 'any general education theory starts with the concept of improvement, how it might be brought about and how it might be assessed, the end product of education is how someone has improved' (p. 102).

This notion of progress, or improvement, presents a challenge for early childhood education. Although not explicitly stated, the DoPs requirement implies that teachers will not only cause 'progress' to occur, they will also provide evidence that it has happened. This presupposes a sound knowledge of child development and a clear understanding of the links between child development and the early

childhood curriculum. It also presupposes an understanding of child monitoring practices as well as the related issues of assessment and evaluation.

Smith (1989) argues that the early childhood community has traditionally resisted the notion of child monitoring and assessment. Early childhood personnel have tended to report programme benefits to children in holistic terms. The benefits are often described as outcomes. Meade (1988) lists a range of general benefits to children from good quality early childhood care and education. Some examples from *Education to be More* are:

- development of self-confidence and trust and a deeper understanding of their own identity;

- development of social skills for good relationships with peers and other adults;

- development of language concepts and vocabulary;

- development of decision making and problem solving skills (p.13).

This approach to valuing early childhood education is based on a wealth of educational research and scholarship produced over the last century in both Europe and North America which has shown that early learning and development is neither sequential nor compartmentalised (e.g. Beck & Winsler, 1995).

The DoPs requirement to 'discuss progress' marks a change from this traditional position. This statement requires teachers to demonstrate benefit, or 'progress' for *individual* children. Wilks (1993, p.5) says that:

> Although early childhood educators firmly believe that valuable learning takes place in their centres, they are now challenged to ..."*satisfy themselves as well as parents, the community they serve and the funding agencies, that early childhood centres are having a favourable effect on children* [Smith 1989, p.39]".

The charter is a contractual agreement between the early childhood centre and the Crown. In this context the DoPs requirement to 'discuss progress' becomes an accountability issue raising the need for monitoring and assessment practices within the sector.

Problematic aspects of monitoring and assessment in early childhood education relate to both 'what' to assess and 'how' (Carr, 1989). Assessment is a process whereby teachers determine whether or not the intended learning and development has occurred. To do this, teachers must first have some expectations in terms of the intended learning and development. Although the early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki, (Ministry of Education, 1996) has recently provided a basis for

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monitoring and assessment, at the time of the study, this document had not been approved. As a consequence, early childhood teachers were grappling with a range of ideological issues with little practical guidance for how to develop and implement monitoring and assessment models.

The pitfalls of monitoring and assessment, including the danger of inappropriate practices and ethical issues, have also been expressed as reasons why the early childhood sector has resisted the introduction of individual assessment methods (Carr, 1989). Most New Zealand assessment policy has been produced by, and for, the compulsory education sector where expectations of learning are more formalised. This is evident in the new mathematics and English curriculum statements (Ministry of Education, 1992 and 1994) which present the expected learning in a sequential structure with suggested achievement objectives at each level.

By contrast, early childhood assessment and evaluation policy is yet to be developed. One of the interesting things that has emerged from this study is that faced with the requirement in the DoPs, centres appear to have developed assessment practices through trial, error and refinement. Their efforts generally proceeded with guidance from the early childhood advisory support services or from ideas gleaned by teachers from books they read or inservice courses attended. The study also shows that the agencies were themselves unclear about expectations and were, similarly, finding their way. This suggests that the principles of assessment and evaluation operating in early childhood services to date have largely emerged from the field rather than from the policy makers. In the light of these developments, the Ministry of Education's 1996 tendering of a contract on assessment and evaluation in early childhood education appears to be a response to grass roots initiatives rather than an action to lead the debate.

THE REQUIREMENT TO 'INFORM' PARENTS

The DoPs state that parents are to be 'informed' about their child's daily programme. 'Inform' implies one-way communication; in other words teachers are required to tell parents about their child's programme. This phrase suggests a top-down or directive form of communication. Such an approach could be in conflict with a partnership model of teacher-parent relationships which has long been upheld as the ideal in New Zealand early childhood services (Smith and Hubbard, 1988).

In this context, 'inform' can be linked to the loosely used terms 'parent education' and 'parent involvement'. Both practices have generally been regarded as desirable in terms of their potential to advance children's learning by raising parental

knowledge and awareness. The phrases themselves signal recognition that parents play a key role in their child's education.

The focus on parents as key factors in children's learning gained momentum in the sixties and seventies as a consequence of Hunt's (1961) theory of modifiable intelligence. 'Parent education' initiatives emerged as a first wave of activity and were closely followed by, and often intertwined with, 'parent involvement' activities. However, both 'parent education' and 'parent involvement' came under attack during the eighties as expected outcomes from these movements were not realised. Parent education began to be viewed as a top-down hierarchical model as highlighted by McMillian (1991) who notes that: 'an underlying message (in parent education) is that 'when you know what I know', you will get it right' (p.46).

Attempts to produce 'parent involvement' in educational settings, on the other hand, often meant having parents working in the kitchen, fund raising or participating in working bees. Jowett and Baginsky (1991) bemoan this in their comment that 'schools may have a great many parents providing assistance and see this as a thriving system of parental involvement, whereas very little dialogue or learning by either parents or staff may be taking place' (p.201).

Loris Malaguzzi (1993), director of the famous Reggio Emilia early childhood centres, throws some light on the parent involvement/partnership debate when he talks about two different types of 'parent involvement'; one type provides a 'warm protective backdrop' (as against partnership relationships which) 'bring together a dynamic parent-teacher interaction toward a common purpose' (p.3).

Tizard, Mortimore and Burchell (1981) who researched 'parent education', 'parent involvement' and 'parent-teacher partnership' practices, claim that the difference between education, involvement and partnership is that with partnership there is an acknowledgment that the teacher has something to learn from the parent and together the teacher and the parent can make the difference. Tizard et al argue that with education and involvement, the parent may enjoy a warm, friendly relationship but, without reciprocity in the recognition of each other's expertise, these practices are unlikely to facilitate information exchange and sharing. Tizard et al encapsulate this in their comment:

> at the heart of parent education and involvement was the need for parents
> to understand what the school is doing and why. Partnership on the other
> hand denotes a need for teachers to find out what is happening in the home
> and why (p.44).

This is in agreement with Malaguzzi's (1993) view that reciprocity, goal consensus, interaction toward a common purpose, balance of power and a working relationship are necessary components which characterise partnership.

Powell (1989) has also argued strongly for the need for early childhood centres to develop beyond 'parent education' and 'parent involvement'. In his discussions he argues that the erosion of social capital in regard to the proper rearing of children and the changing demography of the family are leading to high use of non-familial care thus combining to create a situation where parents need more input but where parents are not readily available to participate in the traditional methods of 'parent education' and 'parent involvement'. Powell argues that manageable partnership models are needed. For Powell, parent-teacher relationships are most beneficial when there is continuity between home and the early childhood programme. Powell says this continuity should be built out of shared information and understanding between families and early childhood programmes (Powell 1989).

In the current study all eleven participating centres were found to provide some form of 'parent education', 'parent involvement' and 'parent-teacher partnership' activities. All centres held parent education workshops, usually with limited participation, and all centres provided information about the value of the learning experiences offered to children. The centres published information about the programme in brochures, through displays on the wall, in the statement of philosophy, in newsletters and in centre diaries. All centres regarded these practices as a part of the process of informing parents of the centre programme.

However, in a free-choice learning environment, it is expected that individual children will create their own programme from the experiences and resources available. To ascertain each child's programme it is therefore necessary to make the link between the programme offered and what the individual child does. The requirement to 'inform parents about their child's daily programme' demands that the teacher provides specific information that goes beyond the global programme statements. In this study an example of successful practice in this regard was provided by centres which used individual note-book recordings that made links between the programme information and the child's behaviour at the centre. As one parent reported:

> 'they have the programme up on the wall and they also tend to refer to it in the individualised note-books so the relationship between the programme and the notebook information can be followed, if it's something new we can also follow it at home. For example, the children were learning about personal hygiene and independence, flushing the toilet, washing their hands; I was able to reinforce it at home.'

Parent-teacher interactions that may reflect 'partnerships', as understood by Malaguzzi (1993) and Powell (1989), were evident in two of the childcare centres in the study. In these two centres, parent-teacher discussions were planned and parent contributions to child note-book and profile information actively canvassed. Both centres had strong management support for partnership building through the allocation of child-non-contact hours and paid parent-teacher interview hours for staff. Of the two centres, one was community-based and the other was privately-owned.

The other nine centres were at various stages along a continuum of child-development-record-keeping, parent involvement and parent-teacher partnership in monitoring children's development. In some centres teachers were unclear as to how partnership translated into practice in regard to the requirement and consequently did not have an understanding of the value which could be derived from it as a practice. In these centres there was also an absence of any clearly defined system for observing and recording children's progress as a basis for discussion.

The next section discusses the observation and record keeping systems used in each of the eleven centres and discussion and communication practices in action; it notes that parent-teacher interactions that reflected a partnership relationship only evolved where teachers developed a robust and effective system for observing and recording children's progress and made provision for discussing records with parents.

CENTRE PRACTICES TO MEET THE DoPs REQUIREMENT: THE EXPERIENCE OF ELEVEN CENTRES

Developing an observation and recording system

Teachers in all eleven centres reported that they observed and monitored children's progress and kept some form of record of this. Monitoring was seen to be in the best interests of the child. Three teachers specifically mentioned that monitoring was a requirement but affirmed that that was not the reason they did it: 'we would do it anyway'. Three teachers reported that they monitored children's progress for the benefit of parents: 'because we owe it to the parents'.

Data from the teacher interviews suggest that in terms of the type of information collected to show individual progress there is a continuum along which teachers are likely to work. Teachers in centres at the early stages of implementation of the DoPs requirement generally focused on emotional and physical well-being, for example, whether the child was settled and happy, and what the child was doing. Teachers working in centres which were further along the continuum were more

likely to focus on overall learning and development including behaviour and health while those at an advanced stage began to include notes on cognitive learning and development. One teacher noted:

> 'it's so new to a lot of staff, we all do it differently, it's what each person feels comfortable with at the moment'.

Six centres reported using checklists as a device for monitoring children's progress but quickly found them to be unsatisfactory as they did not provide the type of information wanted. Comments reflecting this view include:

> 'the checklist wasn't brilliant but is was a something';

> 'it was better than nothing but it didn't bring out the flavour of the child';

> 'the checklist, well, there was a sense of failure, there was no sense of professionalism'.

Teachers reported that they had guidance for implementing recording systems through courses run by the Early Childhood Development Unit and the local College of Education, through communication with other early childhood personnel, by contact with College of Education trainees and graduates and by drawing on information from pre-service training and experience. However, all centres reported developing their own system through trial and error. A teacher response illustrates the struggle involved in this process:

> 'record keeping is new to a lot of people. Getting it into place has been hard. The first child profiles were a challenge but once it's up and running it's not quite the same hassle. We're beginning to see the system and what works and what doesn't more clearly now. There has been a move to the categories: physical, emotional, cognitive and language (development). We continually share ideas at staff meetings'.

Record keeping practices found in the centres varied from developmental checklists, anecdotal recording, running record observations and notes taken at staff meetings. Although all eleven teachers in the study claimed that they used recorded material as a basis for discussion and/or reporting children's progress to parents, the quality of the practices varied according to teacher understanding and the level of support, in terms of child-non-contact-time, they were allocated by management. Table 1 shows the different systems and the combination of systems used by each of the centres in this study including the allocations of child-non-contact-time.

Table 1: Recording systems used in each centre as part of the provision for discussion and number of teachers qualified, teacher turnover during the year and the hours of child-non-contact time allocated to teachers per week.

Type of Recording System in Use	Centre										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Centres using parent-teacher communication note-books				√	√	√	√	√	√		√
Note-books are immediately accessible to parents				√	√	√	√	√			√
Note-book information is used in profile collation				√	√	√	√	√			√
Child profiles used in the centre	√	√	√	√	√	√	√			√	√
Use of daily diary or other system for parents and teachers to record messages for each other	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Functional chart recording system used	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Transition time 'discussion'	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Parents may request interview	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Teachers organise interviews					√						√
Teachers plan to organise interviews						√	√				
Use of individual 'caregiver' system					√	√	√			√	√
Number of qualified teachers in each centre	3	3	2	3	4	3	4	3	3	4	4
Teacher turnover during previous year	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	4	4	2	0
Non-contact hours per teacher per week	1	1	0	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	5

The two main observation and recording systems used were anecdotal recordings in parent-teacher communication note-books and child profile collations. In five centres an 'individual caregiver' system was used to ensure manageability of the task and to personalise the observation practice and the relationship between teachers and parents.

Other recording systems such as the use of functional charts, which record information such as toileting and dispensation of medicine, and the daily diary were used in most centres; however, this information usually remained within the overall centre records and was not included in recording systems for individual children.

Parent-teacher communication note-books

In seven of the eleven centres in the study, teachers recorded anecdotal notes straight into individual parent-teacher communication notebooks. The recordings usually described participation in an activity, children's well-being and/or behaviour. One teacher described the anecdotal notes as a 'grand view':

> 'you don't always know what you want to know. Anecdotal recordings give a picture which can show a need but generally "anecdotal" (recording) is a grand view. You are searching for something that will tell you what the key information you need is'.

Parents from centres using anecdotal note-books reported that the recordings documented what children did and how their day had gone. All parents were positive about the practice as the recording gave insight into their child's day. Some parents' comments included:

> 'every day there is something in the note-book saying what they did for the day and what they said, how they've been';

> 'for me it's been extremely valuable, working full time I miss many things, it (the parent-teacher communication note-book) helps me fill the gaps';

> 'the note-book mostly documents what she did during the day, for example, water play, comments like "K loved the water play, she got stuck in" ';

> 'when I arrive (to collect my child) I ask him what he has done today and he doesn't answer. The note-book is useful as it tells me and it triggers conversation with my child'.

Six of the seven centres kept the note-books in named pocket holders or in a container by the entry door or the signing-in table to facilitate easy and direct access by parents. In all six centres parents were encouraged to take the note-books home, usually during the weekend, to make comments and record events from home. This practice appeared to be an attempt to reduce some of the problems related to lack of time for discussion at transition time and to encourage two-way communication between teachers and parents. The practice was also regarded as part of an objective to establish good parent-teacher relationships. Results were mixed; one supervisor reported:

> 'very few parents take time to write in the note-book, one of the difficulties is that some teachers don't push it. There is a shortage of qualified staff who understand the importance of this'.

Supervisors also reported parents not returning note-books promptly, or losing them, as a continuing frustration.

The seventh centre kept the note-books in a filing cabinet in the office. The parents at this centre did not access the books on a regular basis, if at all. One parent from this centre commented:

> 'they have a book that they complete on each child. I haven't looked at it. I haven't asked, maybe that's it though, it's back on me - they told me it's there'.

In this centre restricted access appeared to constrain continuing communication compared with direct access in those centres where the books were easily accessible all the time.

The frequency of anecdotal recordings varied from one centre to another. In seven centres, note-book recordings for under two-year-old children were done daily. The regularity of notebook entries for over two-year-olds varied. Three of the seven centres ensured something was recorded for all children every day, three other centres tried to record something for each child at least once a week and in the seventh centre recording was irregular with some note-books having no entries for at least a month.

The note-book information was generally not evaluated according to developmental or learning criteria to show progress. The system was not based on a concept of documenting progress although recording could, over time, describe changing behaviours for evaluative progress reporting. Two centres in the study referred to anecdotal recording when compiling material for parent-teacher interviews. In the main, however, the note-books were used as a valuable communication tool which, in part, fulfilled the requirement to inform parents about their child's daily programme.

Individual child profiles

Nine centres kept individual profiles on children. Profiles contained a range of material from examples of children's work, anecdotal observations, running record observations, comments from parents and photographs. In some centres, shared information at staff meetings was also recorded and included in the profiles. Profiles were usually kept in filing cabinets or cupboards and were not immediately accessible to parents. Teachers reported that they preferred to discuss profiles with parents rather than have parents look at them without explanation. However, at one centre, parents were able to request the profile to take home to read.

Of the nine centres keeping child profiles, three were in the early stages of implementation. In these centres, the observation and recording system, the evaluation of the information and the system for sharing the profile with parents were at a formative stage. Teachers at these three centres were struggling with the concept of monitoring children and record keeping. The teachers were also unclear about parent and official expectations and how to manage the task.

Teachers at the other six centres reported using child profiles for at least a year. All teachers claimed to be still 'learning and developing the system' but all expressed confidence in their system and the way it operated in their centre. All six had experimented with different systems. As one teacher commented:

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'(we record) whatever is happening at the moment, we want to know the child is happy, well-adjusted and learning at an acceptable rate. We used to categorise under headings, social (development), emotional (development), physical (development) and cognitive (development) but things fitted under several headings and staff got bogged down. We have tried several different ways over the last two years. Now, we enter the anecdotal note-book information into the child profile once a week. We make professional judgements (on the recorded information) and analyse and comment on the recordings. This system appears to be working well, it gives a holistic view of the child with analysis alongside. Parents are pleased with it'.

The six centres who used child profiles fall into two groups: three centres had systems wherein parents requested an interview or meeting and three had systems wherein teachers arranged meetings with parents. The content of individual child profiles is discussed in the next section and parent-teacher meetings are discussed as part of the section on 'discussion' and 'communication' practices in action.

The 'individual caregiver' system

Five of the eleven centres reported that they operated a system wherein individual teachers were delegated specific responsibility for at least six children. In these centres, the 'individual caregiver' is responsible for maintaining the parent-teacher note-book, the child profile, and for communicating with the parent/s of the children. In all five centres the delegated 'caregiver' was introduced to the new parents and the child at enrolment time.

In two of the five centres the 'caregivers' arranged interviews three times a year. In these two centres, management supported the staff by providing extra paid hours to complete the interview task. Collation and evaluation of the recorded observations was generally done during child-non-contact-time although teachers also reported using their own time for this task.

The following shows how the 'individual caregiver' system worked in two of the five centres:

'Each staff member has a small group (of children); this person is the main observer but everyone does observations on all children. We give our observations to each other. The main observer writes the observations up and prepares the (profile) information for the (parent-teacher) interview, (held once a term). We find good relations develop between teachers and parents, parents prefer to deal with one person. The main observer is also responsible for writing something each day in the child's communication note-book. We meet as a staff once a week to communicate and share our ideas. There's lots of communication between staff'.

Another teacher commented:

> 'Usually we change the children around every four months. This means that all staff work with all children. Staff have to look beyond their own initial perception and work with all the children'.

In these two centres the recordings in the individual parent-teacher communication note-book and information gathering for the child profile operated simultaneously. The note-books were seen as a means of day-to-day communication and the profile was considered more in-depth. Note-book recordings were evaluated as part of the child profile evaluation. Developmental categories (see below) were used as a basis for the analysis and a report was written for discussion with parents. Individual developmental and learning goals were set at interview time, in consultation with the parents.

The developmental categories used by the two centres were as follows:

centre A   thinking development
physical development
social development
emotional development
language development
responses to routines
strengths and special interests.

centre B   cognitive development
social development
emotional development
physical development

In centre B, reports also included comments on:
visual memory
language
listening skills
musical talents
achievements.

The three other centres operated similar systems but at the time of the study were not arranging individual interviews with parents. In these centres parents had to take the initiative to request interviews. The teachers were unclear as to how many interviews had taken place.

The experience of these centres suggests that there is a continuum which centre personnel are likely to traverse in their effort to develop and refine a suitable

method for their centre. Teachers at the beginning of the continuum are likely to use a developmental checklist to monitor children's progress and are unlikely to have formalised a system of sharing the checklist information with parents. Teachers at the other end of the continuum have developed comprehensive observation and recording systems and arrange meetings with parents to share and discuss the information.

'Discussion' and 'Communication' practices in action

All eleven teachers said that they discussed children's progress with parents. All eleven reported that most 'discussion' between staff and parents occurred at transition time.

One of the objectives of the study was to explore the extent to which transition time 'discussion' met the requirement to 'discuss progress' as defined in the introduction to this paper. The content of the transition time exchanges and the parent-teacher interviews were thus explored to determine the extent to which either constituted a discussion about progress in the context of 'partnership'.

Transition time 'discussion' and 'communication'
Neither parents or teachers regarded transition time as a good time to discuss progress. The following teacher comments are examples of regularly expressed views:

> 'We can't go into conference at drop-off and collection time, we need to keep the ratios and other parents are coming in';

> 'Lots of parents may be worried about whether their child is developing appropriately but they wouldn't launch into such an involved conversation at drop-off or collection time'.

Parents echoed the same sentiments:

> 'When picking up at 5.30 we're all tired, it's different if the child is part-time, then I could communicate, for full time it's harder';

> 'I'm often in a hurry dropping off and I often forget what I want to say, it's all very rushed and ad hoc. There could be a more formal time, not a major interview, but time. At drop off and collection there are lots of distractions; 8am and 5pm is crazy'.

The question of equity of access to teacher time, at transition times, was mentioned by one parent:

Communication at the beginning and end of the day is not ideal, it's inconsistent, there is no equity, many parents don't communicate with staff.

It also appeared that the content of transition time 'discussion' generally did not constitute discussion on progress. Parents' comments provided evidence of this:

'They'll tell me briefly what he's done during the day; it's useful, my child has been away from me for sometime and I need to keep in touch with his life';

'we have a casual chat, I talk about anything he's doing at home and they talk about what they're doing'.

These responses echo the findings of Smith and Hubbard (1988) who concluded that a high percentage of transition time discussion revolved around what the child had done during the day.

However, transition time communication appears to be important to retain a functioning parent-teacher relationship, as a teacher from a centre which kept child profiles and arranged interviews three times a year, asserted:

'It's still important to have time to talk to the parents each day; four months is a big gap between interviews, we need continuing discussions'.

Parents' responses also showed that transition time communication was an important part of relationship building and was a factor in establishing trust and rapport as a foundation for more in-depth discussions. The following parent comments reflected this:

'Getting to know the staff is a really big thing';

'when I first started we were friendly but it was a few weeks before I felt relaxed enough to be open and discuss (my child)';

'I have developed a good relationship with staff and feel trusting that they would tell me the things I need to know'.

In conclusion, the experience of these eleven centres indicates that transition time communication does not meet the requirement to 'discuss progress'. However, in most cases this time did help parents to be informed about their child's daily programme, albeit in a rather piecemeal way. More importantly, friendly and supportive relationships were established and maintained through these exchanges

which appeared to be a critical prerequisite for meaningful, indepth discussion at formal parent-teacher meeting times.

Parent-teacher meetings

In all eleven centres, teachers reported that parents may request a meeting at any time. Six of the eleven centres left it to the parents to initiate a meeting. There were clear indications from the parent responses that many parents were reluctant to do this. Parents said they did not want to 'bother' busy teachers or they did not want to single themselves out by engaging in what might be perceived as irregular practice. Some parents were reluctant to appear over-anxious about their child. A number of parents from these centres expressed an interest in meetings or interviews:

> 'I would like an interview to know where he's at, what he's struggling with, what they're working on now and how I can help at home'.

> 'They don't say a lot about developmental progress. I feel (staff) have a lot of knowledge but they don't share it'.

> 'The most practical thing would be interviews, we can talk at childcare but staff are under pressure and there are interruptions. I need to think and write down a few things beforehand. Also interviews would enable K's father to be involved'.

Teachers from centres where parents requested interviews also commented on the limited success of the system:

> 'parents haven't shown a great deal of interest in looking at the profiles, but they all know about them'.

In five centres where the initiative for arranging parent-teacher interviews lay with the teachers, this occurred in a variety of ways. In one centre individual teachers were responsible for 'catching parents' at transition time to share the profile with them. This practice was reported as not being successful and at the time of the study the teachers were considering using formal meetings as an alternative. In the second centre parents were able to attend a staff meeting when their child's progress was to be discussed. This system had met with very limited success. Parents reported feeling uncomfortable discussing their child with several staff. The centre was considering discontinuing the practice. The third centre had just arranged the first parent-teacher interviews and the teachers felt it was too soon to gauge effectiveness. In the last two centres, meetings were arranged with parents every four months. Parents from these two centres affirmed the practice:

'we have appointments, three times a year; it has been very helpful, they tell you everything about the child, it's detailed and categorised, (into developmental and learning categories) I have learnt a lot';

'The information includes all aspects of the child's development, the content is pretty comprehensive, I feel absolutely informed. We meet to discuss and set goals together'.

Teachers from these two centres also affirmed the practice because:

'it's a two-way system, it confirms we're on the right track as parents have the opportunity to say what they want'.

Parents and teachers both reported that meetings based on analysis of information gathered from several sources, including parent comments, were the most effective and seemed, therefore, to meet the requirement to 'discuss progress'. It can be argued that parent-teacher meetings illustrate an approach to education based on the ideal of parent-teacher partnerships, in that the 'discussion' included reciprocity, sharing and joint goal and objective setting for children.

All thirty-one parents were asked how they felt about the opportunities to discuss progress. Twenty-two parents responded that the opportunities were adequate. Nine parents felt the opportunities were not adequate. Among the twenty-two responses which said opportunities were adequate, there were some indications that these responses reflected a trusting and sound relationship with teachers rather than providing a measure of the adequacy of the opportunities to discuss progress. Only seven parents were aware that the Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices requires centres to provide opportunities for parents to discuss their child's progress.

TEACHER AND PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF CENTRE MONITORING PRACTICES

During the interviews parents and teachers were asked to comment on the benefits of monitoring children's progress including the benefits of discussion between parents and teachers. Teachers reported that children benefited through increased focus on their needs; they expected that monitoring would result in enhanced development and learning through focused programme-planning practices. Teachers also reported a sense of increased professionalism. Parents reported benefits through gaining insight into child development knowledge and increased parenting skills.

Teacher perceptions of improved programme-planning practices and increased levels of professionalism

Teachers reported that monitoring children's progress raised staff awareness about children and provided a basis for curriculum planning. In centres where the systems were working well, curriculum planning was based on developmental and learning goals and objectives for children. Teachers said that this marked a change from previous activity-based planning and denoted an advance in the quality of the service as programme-planning became child focused. As one teacher reported:

> 'the observation and record keeping process is the pivot for our child centred planning'.

Teachers also reported an increased sense of professionalism. It appears that the practice of monitoring children's progress gives 'more meaning to our (teachers') work' and 'parents see us as educators'. Teachers reported that focusing on children in this way:

> 'keeps us motivated and focused as we know we have to give feedback. There is a sense of increase in status and staff feel better about themselves'.

A further benefit for teachers was reported in a centre where an 'individual caregiver' system operated. Teachers in this centre reported an upsurge in professional communication between teachers, a newly-fostered team spirit and a sense of common purpose. One teacher reported:

> 'it makes the parents realise that all staff are professionals, it gives staff a sense of self-worth in wanting to do this. Lots of sharing (between teachers) creates a team spirit, everybody is equal, all staff have parents to talk to and all staff have power and responsibility'.

Parental perceptions of benefits of centre monitoring and reporting practices

Where recording and discussion systems were working well the principal benefit reported by parents was a greatly increased sense of security and peace of mind that their child was attending a quality service. Record keeping, note-book communication and parent-teacher meetings provided an assurance that teachers were interested in and cared about 'their' child. Comments from parents illustrate this:

> 'it assures me that they have my child's interests at heart';

'the main thing is peace of mind, my child's developmental needs are taken care of, they're not just filling in time';

'it gives me peace of mind. I'm getting the service I pay for and the emotional security that my child is OK'.

While these responses indicate that effective practices are likely to result in an increased sense of trust and confidence, a number of parents' comments also indicated a growing realisation of the value of monitoring and reporting practices in terms of support for the development of parenting skills and for the education of their children:

'what they tell us is teaching us, they have taught me a lot of things';

'it has made me more aware of child development and progress, otherwise I would just be muddling along on my own';

'I feel supported, it helps me to be more effective as a parent, especially as J is my first child'.

'I feel very happy every day, I never feel frustrated (at leaving my child) I have no problems about the education, they (the staff) think about things before me';

Powell (1989) has written about the needs of the modern family, the erosion of social capital and the growing need for input to parents who find themselves without support. The above comments suggest that in these New Zealand childcare centres the teachers may be beginning to fill the gap which Powell would say exists.

One parent spoke about the benefit of shared information as having enhanced learning for herself and her child:

'my middle daughter was doing grouping; I didn't realise it, all the beans here, the dollies there, I was getting beside myself, the whole house was being grouped into groups. Staff discussed this with me and explained what was happening. I was getting angry but when they explained what it meant, I was able to support the learning'.

This valuable comment illustrates the potential for advanced learning which perceptive staff can capitalise on when they use a child monitoring system which includes meaningful communication and discussion between parents and teachers.

Some teachers in the study suggested that the observation and discussion process helped children by creating a positive relationship between teachers and parents. Teachers expressed the view that children notice this; however, one parent also confirmed it:

> 'my child likes to know there are different relationships, my child needs to know that the parent and staff are friends, she couldn't bear the idea that there would be conflict or tension. Children are conscious of tension'.

An important benefit for children is that the observation and discussion process facilitates consistency between the home and the childcare centre. As one parent said:

> 'we have the same direction, we both (teachers and parents) know where the child is at and we can be consistent'.

OTHER ISSUES SURROUNDING THE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DoPs REQUIREMENT

As McDonald (1989) has commented, the concept of monitoring progress did not feature strongly in early childhood practices before the 1989 education reforms. The responses of the eleven teachers in the study suggest that in implementing practices to fulfil the DoPs requirement, teachers faced a number of challenges which they met in ways that reflect a professional approach to their work. The teachers were generally cautious in the initiation of various practices and endeavoured to build monitoring skills and assessment systems over time. The development of systems occurred on the basis of what teachers felt was best for the child and what would inform the parents and the programme.

The teachers in this study expressed commitment to the principles of monitoring and assessment of individual progress; however, most also reported that they continued to feel insecure about it. This suggests that professional development and advice is still needed to support teachers' learning about the effective implementation of this DoPs requirement.

One serious difficulty which teachers faced in implementing the requirement related to time. Full time childcare teachers usually work a thirty-five hour child contact week. In the centres studied, the average allocation of child-non-contact time is two hours a week for each teacher. In one centre, where teachers had a greater allocation of child-non-contact time (5 hours each a week), the observation, recording and interview system was better managed and more effective. Management at this centre supported this level of professionalism as they

appreciated the flow-on benefits to children and parents. However, the cost of child-non-contact time was raised as a concern.

Allowance for interview time was also raised as an issue. The childcare centres involved in the study operated from 7.30am. until 5.30pm. Holding parent-teacher interviews outside these times would incur cost for the centre.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE POLICY

Clarification and interpretation of the requirement

The data discussed above suggest that clarification of the DoPs requirement is emerging over time rather than as a clear statement at the time of gazetting of the Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices. There was no formula, or universally accepted way, as to how the requirement was to be translated into centre practices in terms of observations, recordings, assessment procedures and discussions. This was a source of stress and challenge for teachers. A trial and error approach to developing child monitoring systems was evident in all eleven centres studied with some centres making greater gains than others in arriving at a workable and effective system that fulfilled the DoPs requirement. This suggests that, in future, a clear interpretation of the expectations of the requirement, and clear supporting policies, are needed to guide teacher efforts.

Centre practices to 'discuss progress' and 'inform parents'

The practices that centres developed to meet the DoPs requirement appeared to fall along a continuum ranging from the use of developmental checklists as a way of monitoring children's progress to more comprehensive observation and recording systems which included meetings with parents to share and discuss information.

Discussion between parents and teachers at transition time, that is at drop-off and pick-up times, was not seen as an effective mechanism for 'discussing progress' but appeared to be valued as a way of keeping parents informed about the child's daily programme and as a way of establishing friendly and supportive parent-teacher relationships.

At the centre level, practices used by teachers to 'inform parents' included mechanisms such as information brochures, wall displays, statements of philosophy, newsletters and centre diaries and functional charts (eg for toileting and sleeping information). At the level of the individual child, centre practices included the use of communication notebooks, compilation of child profiles, the use of the individual caregiver system and individual parent-teacher interviews.

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Parent education/ involvement and parent-teacher partnership

Centre practices to monitor children's progress appeared to operate from de facto 'parent education', 'parent involvement' and 'parent partnership' models of parent-teacher relationships. 'Partnership' relationships only operated where staff developed an effective system for observing and recording children's progress and discussing this with parents. In these cases, there was a perception of, and measurable advance in support for children's learning as well as an increase in perceived support and guidance for parents. This suggests that there may well be a training need to enable all teachers to gain skills, and confidence to develop parent-teacher 'partnerships'.

Policy support for child-non-contact time

In centres where planned parent-teacher discussions were held, parents were able to contribute to child profile information and participate on a partnership basis in this exercise. These centres also had management support for this practice through the allocation of child-non-contact time. Teachers who worked in centres where child-non-contact time was very limited or not available noted the need for policy and financial support to provide this time.

Benefits of centre monitoring practices

Both teachers and parents reported benefits from the centre's use of monitoring and reporting practices. Teachers reported improved programme planning, an increased sense of professionalism and improved professional communication between colleagues. Parents reported an increased sense of security about the quality of the service their children were receiving and a sense of support for their parenting. In the two centres where more advanced monitoring systems operated, parents reported increased knowledge and understanding of their child and enhanced parenting skills. This suggests that there may well be a strong and valuable 'parent education' component within the observation, recording and discussion practices instigated by the DoPs requirement. It may be that this form of 'parent education' is particularly effective because it is personalised, focused on the individual child and provides for information-sharing and goal-setting within a structure of support and reinforcement. These components are all characteristic of teacher-parent partnership relationships as opposed to a relationship in which the parent is educated by a more knowledgeable teacher.

The potential of enhancing parenting skills and parental knowledge through effective implementation of the DoPs requirement has particular relevance in the current policy climate of government commitment to supporting parents in their role as first teachers of their children. It would appear that the policy direction of

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increasing support to parents would be well served if early childhood funding formulas were to recognise the valuable parent support component of quality centre-based early childhood services and resource them accordingly. This would include professional development policies to enhance teachers' monitoring skills as well as skills of working in partnership with parents.

CONCLUSION

This study has pointed out the potential of the DoPs requirement to increase parental and teacher's knowledge of the child, to enhance children's progress and to enhance parenting skills. Teachers in the study reported an increased sense of professionalism as a result of engaging in the monitoring practices instigated by the DoPs. Furthermore, the study indicates that effective implementation of the DoPs requirement supports the centre's ability to develop a partnership relationship between teachers and parents. The potential of the successful implementation of the DoPs requirement to enhance quality in centre-based early childhood education has also been highlighted.

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