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Exploring the role of Police Officers in early childhood settings: Creating a meaningful connection with the community

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood settings provide a place for children to develop connections with their local community. Whilst social capital is recognised as an important factor in community life and a sound determinant for this practice; early childhood services in New South Wales have been further prompted to create and maintain these links through policy and curriculum documents which exist at a State and more recently Federal level (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, 2009; National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2003, 2006; NSW Department of Community Services, 2001) and highlight the importance of community context and authentic experiences for children as a part of these connections.

Initially, the role of the New South Wales Police Youth Liaison Officer was defined as working with children and young people under twenty five years of age; particularly in relation to juvenile justice and reducing youth related crime and victimisation (New South Wales Police Service, 2001). However their role has significantly broadened. The authors of this presentation have been commissioned by the New South Wales Police to develop and deliver training to all Youth Liaison Officers around how children learn and effective teaching practices particularly aimed at children in the early years of school. This initiative has developed out of the implementation of the *Keeping Me Safe* (New South Wales Police Force, 2007) program which must be delivered by a Police Officer in schools.

This paper describes a pilot study, exploring Police aspects in their connections with early childhood settings; the research aims to explore the current role Police Officers play in early childhood settings and identifies the role police believe they can play in connecting with early childhood settings. The research has been conducted with Police Youth Liaison Officers across New South Wales, Australia. A phenomenological approach was enacted to gain an insight into their perceptions and lived experiences through their interactions with early childhood settings. An open ended questionnaire was developed to elicit responses in the following areas: 1) years of service and how they came to the role of Police Youth Liaison Officer; 2) prior experiences with young children; 3) expectations from the local early childhood community in terms of visits; 4) types of information provided in presentations to children (expected and developed) and 5) benefits and constraints of visiting early childhood settings.

The findings from this study will provide a starting point for discussion and reflection for the early childhood field in relation to effective community connections. It will allow teachers to understand Police perceptions of their role in early childhood settings. It will provide an opportunity to begin to reconceptualise the role of Police in settings and will inform the direction of further research in this area.

Introduction

The notion of focusing on environments or contexts over and above individual actions is now recognised in many sectors (Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999). However, it is a relatively

new area of study for the early childhood sector and little consideration has been given to the way early childhood settings and other institutions can interrelate particularly with agencies such as the police, to support the health and well being of young children. This connection has significant implications for the role of Police Youth Liaison Officers who by default are often called on to visit and talk to children on a variety of safety related topics in early childhood settings

Exploring the role of Police Youth Liaison Officers connecting meaningfully with the community has resulted in the following questions being raised as a basis for this paper: What is the role of police in early childhood settings? What are the constraints to Police building connections in early childhood settings? and; Is there a need to reconceptualise the connection between police and early childhood settings?

Background Context

The role of the Police Youth Liaison Officer is mandatory within local commands. The position is awarded via an expression of interest and interview process. Whilst the New South Wales (NSW) Police provide a week long course for all Officers new to the position, Officers are not likely to have had previous training as part of their undergraduate program.¹

Youth Liaison Officers have usually had little experience with children in institutionalised settings and even less experience with addressing or teaching children in a group situation. However, part of their role requires that they attend such settings for a variety of reasons; to provide information about the role of police in their community; to discuss particular issues pertaining to the school community (for instance cyber bullying, road safety) and in particular delivering components of a program titled *Keeping Me Safe* (New South Wales Police Force, 2007). This program has been developed to enable children to learn about protective behaviours; safety in the community; responsible adults to trust and responding in situations when they may feel unsafe (Parliament of New South Wales Legislative Assembly, 2008). The program includes a manual for teachers and possible activities which can be carried out in the classroom setting; advising of information which can be disseminated to families and within school communities (for example the Parents and Citizens Committee). Children are provided with key messages and structured activities for completion. These activities reinforce the key messages of the program about safe people and places.

In the past year, the program has only been offered to year 1 students in primary schools across New South Wales in order to set consistency and tracking of children. However this does not mean that all year 1 students across NSW are involved in the program due to current resourcing constraints of the Youth Liaison Officers. In their role as Youth Liaison Officers they are also required to work with early childhood and secondary children. This includes: presentations at schools and early childhood settings; presentations with community; public speaking; attending community events; cautioning and processing young offenders; and other general legal duties associated with juvenile offenders.

¹ A search of policing undergraduate programs in NSW identified two programs at Charles Sturt University. The *Associate Degree in Policing Practice* did not identify any units which addressed community policing or the role of the Youth Liaison Officer. The *Bachelor of Policing* identifies a core unit entitled *Working with the Community* which identifies the role of working with different community groups and necessary skills for ensuring this is effective (see <http://www.csu.edu.au/handbook/handbook10/undergraduate/BPolicing.htm#course>). University of Western Sydney offer a *Bachelor of Policing* and have an identified unit *Juvenile Crime and Justice* which focuses on juvenile crime in the community context but does not refer to involvement prior to criminal activity (see http://myfuture.uws.edu.au/ug/policing/bachelor_of_policing).

The authors were commissioned by the NSW Police Force to provide workshops as part of the induction process for Youth Liaison Officers. These workshops have captured new and existing officers in this role over the past three years. The workshops include support and information around working with young children in schools; including general developmental expectations, behaviour guidance strategies and techniques for teaching children. At the commencement of each of these sessions the Youth Liaison Officers are asked to identify issues they have when working with young children. A common theme of these discussions is their role in and expectations when working in early childhood settings. For example:

As a Youth Liaison Officer with the New South Wales Police Force, my role involves working with people under the age of 25. When child care centre and preschool Directors contact the Police Station I am the one assigned to visit and talk to the children. At times I question whether this is good use of my time and if it is of benefit to the children. For instance, there have been times when I have arrived at the centre and have been asked to talk in front of thirty 3 to 5 year olds about bike safety and once when I arrived it was the end of rest time. Some children were still asleep on mattresses but the staff pulled them across the room to lie in front of me whilst I tried to talk to the group.

Given the importance of young children developing positive connections with the Police this is an area that would be beneficial to investigate further.

A police perspective: a deficit intervention approach

Literature in relation to police and young children beyond policing journals and considering proactive approaches to working with young children is scarce. An international review of the literature conducted by Beckman, Gibbs, Beatty & Carigiani (2005) over the past six years in the *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal* identified that literature in relation to policing fell into six main categories. The categories were:

- 1) organization and management of the police institution;
- 2) attitudes and behaviours of police personnel;
- 3) concerns surrounding police accountability and misconduct;
- 4) police strategies and tactics;
- 5) citizen satisfaction;
- and 6) evaluations of the overall effectiveness of the police (p.80).

Literature pertaining to community policing was categorised under *police strategies and tactics*. This area was identified as a significant contributor to the body of literature. However, further investigation revealed that this literature related to community issues involving police such as domestic violence, neighbourhood issues and complaints from citizens and gun issues (Varriale, Gibbs, Ahlin, Gugino, & Na, 2007). Therefore, whilst the articles showed a link to community, the emphasis was on the role of police in their local community and their reaction to particular community disturbances (Murphy, Rosenheck, Berkowitz, & Marans, 2005). There was no evidence of proactive policing, nor any mention of any connections to early childhood settings.

In relation to young children and police, the literature tended to highlight children as victims of abuse and domestic violence. It emphasised the role of police in investigating these cases. This literature also acknowledged the importance of the link between health professionals and the police in an interagency approach (Murphy et al., 2005; Osofsky, 2004; Osofsky et al., 2004). This deficit perspective to policing is also the focus for children and police on the New South Wales Police website; their section titled *Children* under *Community Issues* provides information in relation to the *Sex Crimes Squad*,

Truancy and the internet support website available for assisting in identification of *Child Exploitation* (see http://www.police.nsw.gov.au/community_issues/children). Whilst the authors recognise the importance of these areas for the safety and well being of children, it does not also show a proactive approach to connections.

Studies which specifically identified connections between police officers and children were not prolific in the literature. However, two studies are described further here which directly relate to this paper. The first study was an evaluation study of a social intervention program conducted in the United Kingdom with adolescents in school settings (Hopkins, Hewstone, & Hantzi, 1992). Changes to education policy and practices saw the introduction of police-school liaison officers in high school settings. The rationale for this approach was that there would be an improvement in the police image and the relationship between adolescents and police generally. Police-school liaison officers were involved in different aspects of the school day; discussions about particular pupils and associated discipline; investigating school related crime; and as a general presence in the school halls/ canteen/ yard. The evaluation study involved target (officers in schools) and control (no identified intervention) schools to show any measurable impact over time. Students in each group completed two questionnaires at specified times to assess any impact or measurable change to perceptions and attitudes to police (Hewstone, Hopkins, & Routh, 1992; Hopkins et al., 1992). A significant finding from the study identified that more positive views of police-school liaison officers and police generally was held by students in target schools, however it was also shown that students did not view the police-school liaison officer as a 'general' type of police officer but rather in a different capacity (Hopkins et al., 1992).

The second study, an Australian qualitative study conducted in Melbourne, involved interviews with one hundred and twelve 5-8 year old children across five metropolitan schools (Powell, Skouteris, & Murfett, 2008). The study aimed to identify children's perceptions of the role of police in society. The interview questions addressed children's knowledge of the work of a police officer, whether they had seen a 'real' police officer, if they had seen a police officer at other times or on television and whether they had any aspirations to be a police officer (Powell et al., 2008, p. 467). Findings showed that children held strong stereotypes of the role of police officers, particularly in relation to punitive aspects of their role. The authors acknowledged that this is consistent with similar previous studies. This finding is also apparent in comments made by the NSW Police Youth Liaison Officers when they attended the previously mentioned workshops. They cited that often children's first point of interest is to view their gun or other weapons and they have often been asked whether the officer has killed anyone. Powell, et al. (2008) identified the significant implications these perceptions have for children who are victims of crime as they do not see the role of police to be one of support and assistance. They highlighted the necessity of increased meaningful partnerships between school [early childhood settings] and police, which address perceptions of police officers in their community role.

Reframing a community approach

Social capital and community engagement has been discussed and deconstructed in detail over the past decade. Social capital is increasingly seen to be a crucial ingredient of civil society, economic development, the health and well being of people and of community development (Cox, 2002; Onyx & Bullen, 1999; Putnam, 1995; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2000). Social capital is commonly referred to as the 'social fabric' or 'glue' of the community (Putnam, 1995, p. 51) and is created through the interconnections between

people that create networks, shared feelings of social belonging, trust and mutual benefit (Cox, 1995; Onyx & Bullen, 1999; Putnam, 1995). According to Cox (2002) an important attribute of social capital is being able to trust both people and institutions.

Bullen and Onyx (1999) argue that community engagement and social capital are inextricably linked. Community engagement involves working in co-operation, making decisions and building programs that include the cultural values and customs of the children and families who live in the community (Myers, 1992; Williams, 2004). These authors argue that without some form of networks between families, the neighbourhood and community trust relationships will not form.

Current literature illustrates the changes occurring in Western societies whereby communities have an increase in the sense of isolation (Ife, 1998, 2002); an increase in working hours (Adamson, 2002; Arndt, 2000); a decrease in extended family and/or other support (Australian Labour Party, 2001; Nance, 1999); an increase in fear of crime and a decrease in sense of trust of people (Murphy, 2001). The recognised benefits of social capital have resulted in a focus on ways to support people (children and families) within their context or community.

At the same time there has been a tremendous leap in our understanding that the realisation of human potential has roots in the early years of life and that environments play a significant role in the long term physical, neurological, psychosocial and emotional/behavioural developments. Both biomedical and psychosocial resiliency in adults has been shown to be correlated with the social connections in the early years (Barry, 1996; Cox & Swinbourne, 1999; Leeder & Dominello, 1999; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Swick et al., 1997; Vimpani, 2000; World Health Organisation, 1997). Research has shown that stable and nurturing environments in childhood are co-related to an adults' ability to cope with stressors and traumatic events. Therefore, healthy environments in the early years are co-related to biomedical health throughout the life span (Barry, 1996; Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2000; Gammage, 2000; McCain & Mustard, 1999; Mustard, 2000).

Conversely, there is evidence that social isolation is linked to immediate and long term biophysical diseases and to mental health breakdowns. Aspects of unhealthy communities, such as homelessness, crime, poverty, substance abuse and break down of the family unit, have been shown to be linked with feelings of alienation, helplessness and isolation (Jason, 1997; Schuler, 1996). Therefore, healthy communities are seen as a way to transform cycles of poverty and social diseases (Putnam, 1995; Vinson, 1999).

Hampshire and Healy (2000) discuss a model that synthesises both the macro and micro levels of civil society. This model is drawn from the work of Woolcock (1998) and the model situates all three parts as essential to the health and well being of both individuals and society as a whole. Hampshire and Healy (2000) argue that conceptually all three parts overlap and are not as effective if viewed as separate parts. The model includes:

1. Bonding with family, close friends and a close network
2. Bridging to wider networks with the community
3. Linking to institutions, business, government (Hampshire & Healy, 2000, p. 4).

This model could be a way of rethinking the connections between Police and early childhood settings.

Police in early childhood settings

In the current climate, emphasis on community linkages and inviting visitors into early childhood settings is prevalent in policy and curriculum documentation (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, 2009; National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2003, 2006). Support for these connections has been progressively increasing in the past ten years in early childhood settings in New South Wales. At a State level, the *New South Wales Curriculum Framework for Children's Services* highlights a core part of the curriculum as promoting "relationships and connections, both within the service and with individuals and organisations in the larger community" (NSW Department of Community Services, Office of Childcare, 2001, p. 93).

Changes to leadership in the Australian Federal Government in 2007 (Australian Labor Party) have resulted in early childhood being on the national agenda and the development of a national framework for all early childhood settings in Australia (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2009). This mandatory framework *Belonging, Being and Becoming* also emphasises the need to expand links with appropriate community agencies. For instance outcome 2 identifies: "children are connected with and contribute to their world" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 26). Within this outcome the early childhood setting needs to demonstrate the connections they have made with the local community, including respecting community protocols. All these policy and curriculum documents have had significant implications for services in the community, such as an increased emphasis on the profile of police with young children through the early childhood setting.

The existing *National Quality Improvement and Accreditation System* (QIAS) requires early childhood settings to develop connections with appropriate local community agencies to achieve high quality ratings (NCAC, 2006). Early childhood settings have been known to connect with local police, fire fighters and ambulance officers on a yearly basis to achieve this outcome via visits to the setting or children attending these community work places on excursions. These links are not just confined to these community supports but have also been known to extend to local doctors, dentists and other service types in the community.

The new National Quality Standards, operational in 2011 will supersede the QIAS. In these standards there is also recognition that settings will develop collaborative partnerships with the community. This will involve collaborating with community agencies to enhance the learning and well being of children as well as participating in the community (Council of Australian Governments, 2010).

Changes to these policy and curriculum documents have implications for community connections beyond early childhood settings; particularly for Police Youth Liaison Officers who may not be resourced to see this role as their 'core' business. The aim of this study was to explore the current role of Youth Liaison Officers in early childhood settings from their perspectives and to address the following questions:

1. What is the role of police in early childhood settings?
2. What are the constraints for police building connections with early childhood settings?

Methodology

This pilot study used a phenomenological approach to investigate police perceptions of their role and connections in early childhood services. Phenomenology identifies 'phenomena' through the eyes of the participants and is a reflection and interpretation of

these experiences (phenomena) from the participants' perspectives. This means that reality cannot be known apart from the knower, and that knowing is within the context of the experience. This approach is a 'way of seeing' and helps create opportunities for new understandings (Heidegger, 1992; Husserl, 1965; Lyotard, 1991; Moran, 2002; van Manen, 1990).

After appropriate ethics clearances were obtained via University and New South Wales Police, an email was forwarded through the Principal Tutor of the Youth Liaison Officers inviting them to take part in an online questionnaire to explore the role of Police Officers in early childhood settings. The questionnaire was set up in *Survey Monkey*, an online survey tool. The questionnaire was developed to elicit responses in the following areas:

- 1) Demographic information including years of service and how they came to the role of Police Youth Liaison Officer.
- 2) Prior experiences with young children.
- 3) Expectations from the local early childhood community in terms of visits.
- 4) Types of information provided in presentations to children (expected and developed).
- 5) Benefits and constraints of visiting early childhood settings.

An email was subsequently sent a week later reminding and inviting Police Youth Liaison Officers who had not completed the survey to take part.

Findings were analysed with the assistance of QSR NVivo; a qualitative computer software program designed to support analysis. Each questionnaire was assigned a reference code (responses were anonymous) via *Survey Monkey* and responses were downloaded and imported into NVivo. Data were initially analysed to elicit answers in relation to the predetermined questions and further scrutinised against demographic data to look for patterns and further themes.

Participants

The NSW Police Force has 92 Youth Liaison Officers across six determined regions. Forty one officers across these regions participated in the survey (see table 1). This was a return rate of 44% which is considered significant and an acceptable return rate for this method (Wiersman, 1991). Of the respondents 75% of the NSW Police Youth Liaison Officers chose to work in this role, with 58% of these respondents having a previous qualification that related to educating or counselling children of various ages. The majority (68%) of the Youth Liaison Officers had been in this role for less than 3 years and 38% had no previous experience working with children under 5 years of age prior to this role.

Table 1: Respondents by Region

Region	Total number of Youth Liaison Officers	Total number of survey returns
Central Metro	16	11
Western	13	4
North West	16	10
Northern	16	7
Southern	14	5
South West Metro	17	4

Findings

Findings from the survey were addressed under the following research questions and are described further below:

1. What is the role of police in early childhood settings?
2. What are the constraints to Police building connections in early childhood settings?

1. What is the role of police in early childhood settings?

The responses provided by the Youth Liaison Officers were coded into two clear categories; 1) relationship building and 2) educational. The main reason or benefits Officers identified was the importance of building a positive relationship with the children to break down any negative barriers that young children may have developed from their family, the community or media about the images of Police. For instance one Youth Liaison Officer stated:

To build a good rapport with the kids for the future and for them to know that police are the good guys.

The notion of police image was reported in 8 responses. Police being perceived as approachable and friendly were key for the visits. Comments included:

To allow young children to have contact with police and know who and what the police are.

Give children the correct perception of police as being friendly and helpful.

To portray a positive image of police. Police help people too. Talk about police uniform and the role of police.

Interestingly, several respondents identified parents as a significant contributor to negative images of police.

In order to build trust and positive relationships between police and children. Also to alter false perceptions given to children by negative parenting.

Some of the kids get a little scared as there parents have painted a picture of police that they are coming to take them away.

I believe the most important part of Police visiting these centres is so the children become familiar with Police, I have met so many parents that tell their children that if they are naughty then Police will take them away. I am so against this as we want the children to be able to approach police if they are in danger or lost.

This reinforced comments made by Youth Liaison Officers during workshops. They commented on parents who used statements such as “If you don’t put your seatbelts on the Police will come and take you away” as well as more extreme *threats* from parents as part of their behaviour management strategies; for example, “if you don’t get in the bath, the police will come and take you away”.

Another Youth Liaison Officer spoke about the benefits of breaking down the barriers between children and police and recounted a story where she had visited a preschool and then later attended a domestic violence incident. The child from the preschool she had visited recognised her and once the parents knew of this they were willing to speak to her.

The benefits for me have been massive. Breaking down the barriers between children and police and the different nationalities also. For example, I visited

a pre school and talked to the children about the police and safe people and safe places. The child then informed their parents that they knew me when I attended their residence for a domestic [domestic violence report] and the parents were willing to talk to me once the child identified that they had seen me before.

The Youth Liaison Officers also saw their role as educating children in early childhood settings. Education was most likely to be focused around safety, and the role of police in the community. Comments included:

To teach them the importance of personal safety and teach them about the dangers and how to avoid them.

Be involved in the learning process for children with regards to their safety, some preparation for safety issues around going to school and being in the community.

One male Officer who identified as having children of his own, saw his role as moving beyond safety and general relationship building with police:

Reinforcing safety tips together with the importance of respecting parents and using good manners.

2. What are the constraints to police building connections with early childhood settings?

Thirty three of the respondents identified connections between Youth Liaison Officers and early childhood settings as beneficial with 97% identifying that they had visited early childhood settings since being in the role. 90% stated that they had visited more than one setting in the past 12 months. With only 10% identifying that they had visited the same setting more than once.

Whilst connections were deemed as important and beneficial, Youth Liaison Officers highlighted several constraints in visiting early childhood settings. These were coded to the following:

- 1) Time constraints. Visiting early childhood settings was not considered 'core business'. Youth Liaison Officers identified that they had other more pressing responsibilities which did not always make it possible to visit.

Time to attend and knowing where all centres are. If they are proactive they will request a visit however there are centres who do not involve police or other community people.

Time constraints. Work load dealing with cautions, meetings and other operational needs make it difficult to dedicate time to this aspect of the job.

- 2) The number of early childhood settings in a region. Officers spoke of large numbers of early childhood settings and the impact of time in being able to visit all settings. Further, Officers based in regional parts of New South Wales spoke of the constraints with geographical distances to travel to get to the settings.

I only go to the childhood settings when requested as I have 60 Primary Schools in my LAC [local area command] to cover so time is always pretty pushed.

- 3) Lack of appropriate training and resources to support them in their role at the early childhood settings. 62% of the Youth Liaison Officers believed they did not receive sufficient training to work with children in early childhood settings. The Officers did not feel comfortable to deliver information and were unsure how to keep the children engaged in a meaningful way. Comments included:

Children under the age of 5 years have a shorter attention span and police need training to keep them engaged.

As a YLO there could be more training on what to talk about and what to expect when working with under 5's.

Access to vehicle, other work commitments or heavy workload, no resources for hand out such as fingerprint cards, stickers etc due to budget constraints.

- 4) Age of children and a belief that this age group does not benefit from visits from the Youth Liaison Officer. For instance:

I feel that visiting daycare centres is not as important as visiting schools. Most children do not benefit from a police visit at this age.

- 5) Requests from the early childhood setting. Some Youth Liaison Officers felt the expectations from settings were not realistic, or they did not reinforce the messages being delivered by the Youth Liaison Officer (before or after the visit had occurred). For example:

Some of the topics some teachers have requested in the past are not appropriate for young children. It is hard to get any structured message across, ie road safety, keeping me safe.

In some instances the preschools and other educational institutions do not provide the children with any information about the police before our visit, nor follow up with any positive feedback afterwards. I have found it to work best when the police visit is incorporated into the curriculum.

With the younger children (under 2's) – [they are] too young to understand and they have a limited concentration. When they are mixed in with the older children they can also be distracting to the talk and the rest of the children listening.

Discussion

The findings from this pilot study show that there are possibilities and opportunities for Youth Liaison Officers to move beyond the role of police as reactive into a more proactive approach. Whilst it is acknowledged that there are constraints at this point in time, it should be recognised that the participants in this pilot were supportive of creating connections which would benefit young children in early childhood settings.

There is potential for the model developed by Hampshire and Healy (2000) to be adapted for the role of Youth Liaison Officer's role in building social capital with children in the early childhood setting.

1. Bonding with police through early childhood settings offers opportunities to form close networks and to breakdown stereotypes of the role of police in the community. This was supported with the following comments:

[I] enjoy the liaison with youth/programming. Personally feel that I can contribute and hopefully make a difference to those I mentor.

I love helping and assisting children, the kids love seeing the Police, and car. They are eager to learn, and have great questions.

I love children of all ages... and like to change perceptions of police and try to make a difference in children's lives.

2. Bridging provides opportunities for children through early childhood settings to develop an awareness of the concept of police and their role in serving and protecting community. This would include the delivery of content, such as the *Keeping Me Safe* program (New South Wales Police Force, 2007). For example, Officers stated;

I like the interaction with the pre schools and primary schools. It is also satisfying to be able to liaise with families and assist with any difficulties they may be having with their children.

I enjoy working with young people and when you are able to help a young person it is very rewarding. I like helping a young person through difficult times.

3. Linking allows institutions, such as the police and early childhood settings, to connect and build relationships that create supportive and healthy environments for young children. Developing this link would allow for cross collaboration about the needs of the early childhood setting in terms of educational programs, as well as provide a space for evaluations of current programs the Youth Liaison Officer delivers. Officers stated,

Some consultation with the owners/teachers of the centre as to what they want spoken.

Network with external youth agencies.

I love working with the kids, I enjoying running programs and keeping kids out of the legal system.

I enjoy the diversity of the work although this can be challenging at times due to the fact that not only are you an operational police officer working within the legislation but at times, the expectations particularly by parents is that you are a qualified counsellor. Sometimes you forget yourself as giving advice and referrals is a large part of the daily routine. I enjoy dealing with children of all ages but this can also be challenging, wrought with both rewards and disappointments. I also enjoy the challenge of initiating and supporting programs and networking with agencies.

Current considerations for Youth Liaison Officers

Whilst creating ongoing relationships with police in early childhood settings has the potential to enable children to view police positively, findings have brought to light restrictions Officers currently face in developing this bridging and linking role. For instance, within metropolitan areas of Sydney there are numerous early childhood settings in the specified region that the Youth Liaison Officer is responsible for. Prioritisation of these visits means that not all settings are likely to be visited each year. In terms of rural and remote areas of New South Wales, the geographical distance between towns requires the Youth Liaison Officers to travel considerable distances. This is again restrictive in terms of being able to develop and sustain connections with these settings. To overcome these limitations requires extra resourcing. Given the focus on intervention and the positive results from building bridges and linkages this would seem to be an opportune time to redefine how this can be implemented effectively and equitably so all children in all communities can build these connections with the Youth Liaison Officers.

The argument for bridging and linking provides a unique opportunity to consult with both the early childhood sector and the New South Wales Police Youth Liaison Officers to create an evidence base for understanding the issues. By creating a space for discussion between the two professions the beginning of a cohesive interagency partnership could be created. This partnership would also provide an opportunity to inform the development of materials and resources which are currently lacking for Police Youth Liaison Officers to assist them to work meaningfully with early childhood settings. The development of teaching resources in consultation with the early childhood profession would ensure a clear message of the value of connections to the Police Force. This could be built upon as children progress through formal school and life, thereby reducing misconceptions and increase positive messages of the role of police officers in the community.

Conclusion

Although Governments cannot be relied on solely to solve the problems of deteriorating communities and community engagement it is important that the resourcing capacity is made available to enable this bridging and linking to occur. This still requires a whole of community approach that is inclusive and participatory as this is more likely to result in creative and successful solutions to the issues communities face (Schuler, 1996). By reframing the role of the Police Youth Liaison Officers, there is an opportunity to connect with young children and contribute to the social capital of communities. The time has come to rethink the connections between police and early childhood settings. This requires new ways of working authentically and meaningfully that has multiple benefits, including children, families, communities and the early childhood and police professions.

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