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Frameworks for Change: Four recurrent themes for quality in early childhood curriculum initiatives.

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Abstract

This paper reports on the first phase of a case study which investigated how early childhood teachers experience organisational change. As one of three levels of quality improvement, state government funded curriculum initiatives were developed with an aim to promote change. Three curriculum documents, one each focussing on literacy, pedagogy and health, were released in a short time frame. Analysis of the content of these documents reveals four themes of change which reflected the theories underpinning the waves of change flowing across New South Wales, Australia, in the years 2001-2.

Introduction

Changes in understandings of early learners, curriculum and early learning environments may require the development of documents to initiate and support change within early childhood education settings. Change across a diverse early childhood education system is necessarily complex, although organisational change processes offer multiple possibilities for facilitating large scale change (Owens, 2001). This article examines how the New South Wales (NSW) state government in Australia, responded to international influences on quality early childhood education and care in the years 2001-2002. The issue is being investigated at this time as there is currently substantive pressure from a new federal government to address the “Education revolution” (Gillard, 2008). Lessons may be learned from this earlier round of state government initiatives to assist with current change processes.

One underlying assumption of educational organisational change is subsequent improvement in the quality of the system of education (Creemers, 2002). Although the notion of quality in early childhood settings is contested (Dalhberg, Moss & Pence, 1999), for the purposes of this paper, quality can be conceptualised in terms of levels. One level of quality is monitored by the state government department responsible for the licensing of child care services. This

structural level includes: service facilities, staff-child ratios and teacher qualifications which are monitored through compliance with the Children's Services Regulations (NSW, Department of Children's Services, 2004, p.6). These regulations include legislative minimum standards to "ensure these services provide a safe and appropriate care and educational environment for children" (NSW Department of Community Services, 2007, p. 6). Wangmann (1995) classified the elements of quality as addressed in the regulations, as "contributing components" (p. 91) that are a base-line for quality. Although research indicated that key quality indicators were: qualified staff, low staff-child ratio and small group sizes (Howes, Phillips & Whitebook, 1992; OECD, 2001) and advocates for quality demanded changes in policy in such components (Pocock & Hill, 2006), industry advocates argue that increased staff costs would lead to increased fees to parents (Press, 2006). Therefore, staff-child ratios, staff qualifications and care group size have remained largely unchanged in NSW during the last decade (NSW Department of Children's Services, 2004).

A second level of quality is monitored through the national Quality and Improvement Assurance System (QIAS) (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005) introduced in Australia in 1994. This accreditation process monitors "determining components" of quality, components that are "essential, but intrinsically not susceptible to regulation" (Wangmann, 1995, p. 91). This process level of quality includes: service management, programming of play based experiences, relationships and nutrition. The QIAS includes the service's self-study Continuous Improvement Plan as well as the Moderator's Continuous Improvement Guide for each service. This organisational change process is a collaborative bi-directional change process (Fullan, 1993a) that exchanges process quality and improvement for access to a national child care subsidy for parents. This form of organisational change that focuses on process components is a relatively cost effective form of change (Owens, 2001). The regular updating of the underlying principles of the QIAS has required early childhood staff to engage in a continual change cycle.

A third level of quality assurance emerged in the 1990s as the focus for quality and improvement was extended from structural and process components to early childhood curriculum. In New Zealand and a number of states across Australia, relevant government departments embarked on developing early childhood education curriculum documents. This process commenced in New Zealand when the Ministry of Education (1996) released *Te Whariki: Early Childhood Curriculum*. Two years later the Queensland Department of

Education (1998) published the *Preschool Curriculum Guidelines*. This implementation was independently evaluated (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 2002) and some recommendations were incorporated into the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006) intended for the introduction of a non-compulsory school entry year. Meanwhile, in another state, *The South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework* (SA Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2001) was released as an integrated birth to Year 12 curriculum. The *New South Wales Curriculum Framework* (Stonehouse, 2001), which is a focus of this paper, was developed by the Department of Community Services, at a midpoint in this curriculum change phenomenon. It applied only to prior to school services. This was followed by the Tasmanian Department of Education's (2004) introduction of the *Essential Learnings Framework*, another curriculum for learners from birth to 16 years. At that point, however, two states were still in the development stage. In 2004, the Victorian Department of Human Services (2004) released a discussion paper, *Beliefs and Understandings: A conversation about an Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* suggesting an early stage of development of a state curriculum while in Western Australia, the Early Childhood Australia state president (Barblett, 2007) highlighted the absence of a curriculum framework in settings for children from birth to three years.

Across Australia the curriculum frameworks had differing status. The NSW curriculum framework was distributed to all licensed services and was non-mandatory (Department of Community Services, personal communication, August 4, 2008; Stonehouse, 2001), and, as such was an invitation to change. While a voluntary approach to change initiatives may seem to lack power in affecting practice, and mandatory change processes seem to imply widespread compliance, research indicates that teachers may circumvent mandated initiatives by various means, such as *surface adoption*, where teachers can make it appear they have undertaken the change (Thompson, 2001). Fenech and Sumsion (2007) extend this argument in revealing that early childhood teachers believe that the regulatory environment limits their autonomy. Further, Fullan (1993a) argues low level of adoption may occur because authorities cannot mandate a teacher to change practice and/or beliefs.

A disadvantage of a non-mandated curriculum, however, is the absence of downward, external pressure on teachers to implement changes (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). Therefore, teachers have to engage with the document, perceive a potential benefit from the change, and

be able to successfully implement the change which may involve transforming their beliefs (Mezirow, 2000; Pennington, 1995; Gusky, 2000). Teachers enact their roles as the silent partners in educational change. Without external pressure on teachers, there is the risk of day-to-day issues taking priority over non-mandated curriculum documents; thus the status quo remains.

Organisational change may be achieved through the production and diffusion of curriculum frameworks, however, they comprise only one strategy in the complex processes of change (Owens, 2001). This strategy is the research-develop-diffuse (RDD) process. The components of this strategy are: researching an area of need, developing a product, such as a new curriculum initiative, and then making it available to teachers. One aim is to initiate personal change processes in teachers, resulting in new classroom practices (Fullan, 2001). Where curriculum is developed by government agencies, the organisational change process is classified as a top-down, outside-in model (Fullan, 1993a). This planned and managed model of change dominated the school reform movements of the 1980s in Australia (Owens, 2001) although this empirical-rational strategy had been critiqued in the change literature as ineffective (Sarason, 1990). Nevertheless, the NSW government adopted this organisational change model in the 1990s to transform early childhood education, perhaps due to the absence of other accessible or affordable strategies.

Context and study

In NSW, childcare places for children under 6 years of age are distributed across a range of services, with a bulk of service provision in preschools and long day care services. As childcare services in NSW are fractured across many organisational and accountability systems, the systemic commonality for change throughout early childhood education in the last ten years has been state government documents. As a collection, these initiatives have been diverse, yet narrowly focussed, with the health and welfare of children being the prime focus. Topics were, for example: HIV/Aids, road safety, asthma, family support services and health and safety (see, EC Road Safety Unit, 1996; Heslep, Impey, & Smith, 1997; NSW Department of Community Services, 1995; Sheeley & Tipper, 1999).

International influences on NSW early childhood curriculum

An international view of early childhood education reveals a number of innovative influences on curriculum which had the potential to extend the role of government agencies from regulators of base standards to embracing a broader responsibility for quality through curriculum. Over the past two decades the discourse of formal Western early childhood education has been grounded in the philosophy of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Farquhar & Fler, 2007). Subsequent influences on Australian curriculum included the experiences of educators in Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998; Fleet, Patterson & Robertson, 2006; Grieshaber & Hatch, 2003; Millikan, 2003), sociocultural theory (Edwards, 2003; Fler et al., 2006; Hedges, 2000; Windschitl, 2002; Wood & Attfield, 2005), the generically titled ‘early brain development’ research (Talay-Ongan, 1998) and, arising from a position of advocacy, poststructural perspectives (MacNaughton, 2003).

Three NSW curriculum initiatives

In 1998, the NSW government established the Office of Childcare directed by June Wangmann. The aim of this new office was to “provide the framework for policy advice, planning, funding, regulation and coordination of the children's services” (Children’s Services NSW, n.d.). With a mandate to support and improve children’s services, with new initiatives, the office commissioned 12 research projects worth 1.3 million dollars in its first year of operation (Children and Education Research Centre, 2003). This research-develop-diffuse process produced curriculum documents for early childhood services (Department of Community Services, personal communication, August 4, 2008).

These three curriculum documents became the focus of this study:

- *Literacies, communities and under 5’s: The early literacy and social justice project. A resource for families and early childhood staff.* (Arthur et al., 2001),
- *New South Wales curriculum framework for children’s services: The practice of relationships: Essential provisions for children’s services* (Stonehouse, 2001) and
- *The health promoting early childhood program: Linking families and communities* (Hayden, De Gioia, Fraser & Hadley, 2002).

Their intended place in the landscape of regulation and quality was reflected in an introductory statement from one of these documents, “It complements and goes beyond regulations and quality assurance systems” (Duffie, 2001, p. 4). The components of quality and therefore the directions of change within these documents became the focus of this, the first stage, of a larger study of teacher change.

Curriculum, as defined here, refers to the provisioning of the environment as well as relationships between children, staff and parents (Stonehouse, 2001). The title of each curriculum document has been abbreviated for ease of reporting. The matrix column titles have been labelled respectively: “Literacy”, “Pedagogy” and “Health”.

As tangible artefacts of a process of organisational change, the curriculum documents were examined to contribute to an understanding of change factors embedded in each document. This examination was located in a qualitative paradigm with theoretical underpinnings aligned with the constructivist interpretive approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2003) and informed by theories of educational change (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994, 1997; Stoll & Fink, 1996), diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003) and teacher change (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Hall & Hord, 2001). The interrelationship of these theories and the multifactorial nature of change provided the foundation for a subsequent study of early childhood teachers’ experiences of organisation change processes.

Method

This study adopted Yin’s (2003) temporal case study phases as logical to study design (Bach, Belardo & Faerman, 2004). The first phase reported here investigated focus curriculum documents. Including such documents strengthens a case study as these stable artefacts exist prior to the study (Yin, 2003). Including three curriculum initiatives allowed for a broad investigation of state-wide innovations introduced into early childhood education in New South Wales within a two year period. Each had a distinctive focus so was key to understanding the context of the study and subsequently, the lived experience (van Manen, 1995) of teachers.

The curriculum documents were analysed as texts, using framework analysis (Richie & Spencer, 1994 as cited by Lacey & Luff, 2001) which was developed in the context of applied policy research (Lacey & Luff, 2001). Framework analysis is based on a thematic

approach and is used where there are time constraints and the analysis is to be concluded when specific questions have been answered.

Examination of these documents provided contextual and confirming information for this study. The five steps as set out by Lacey and Luff (2001) were implemented as follows:

- (a) Familiarisation – which involved repeated readings of each document.
- (b) Identification of the thematic framework – which revealed issues related to change processes.
- (c) Coding by indexing included the creation of matrices
- (d) Matrices – which contained textual (rather than numerical) data, thus reflecting the qualitative design of this study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Quotes from the documents exposed the reader directly to the documents and their different characteristics.
- (e) The final step was to find patterns, associations, concepts and explanations (e). This step revealed themes underpinning all three documents, consequently identified as ‘cross-case’ themes (Huberman & Miles, 1998).

Framework analysis is generally inductive and is guided by the formation of specific questions. In this instance, initial analysis employed the use of inductive questions, such as “What are the suggested key ideas for teachers?” to reveal the change strategies of each curriculum innovation. These questions were followed by emergent questions, such as, “What is the relationship between these ideas or strategies?” to reveal underlying themes. The results of this investigation are reported in the following section.

Findings

The NSW government was the central sponsor of these curriculum initiatives. The documents themselves were developed by diverse teams comprising representatives of government, academe, independent consultants, early childhood peak organisations and special interest groups. Different teams developed each curriculum. Woodrow and Brennan (1999) state that such a “hierarchical and expert knowledge approach could be interpreted as deliberately exclusive” (p. 89). Consultation, however, which is recognised as an organisational change strategy, occurred in the form of teachers piloting each curriculum (Arthur et al., 2001; Hayden et al., 2002; Stonehouse, 2001) and suggests teachers were involved in the development phase of the documents.

Moving beyond the prime focus of each individual curriculum initiative, (literacy, pedagogy and health), the guiding conceptualisations that emerged from this investigation were located in four key domains. Although teachers are the agents of change (Fullan, 1993b) and therefore initiate most changes, the broad range of changes were characterised by the domain of the change. The documents suggested changes that were either a physical change in that domain or an intangible change to improve the outcomes for the person located in that domain. For example, if a teacher initiates improved communication with families the change would impact directly on parents and their partnership in a child’s learning experience. Table 1 positions these four domains: the teacher, the environment, the child and the family, identified with the change theme that emerged from each of these change domains.

Table 1: Change domains and their emergent themes

Change Domains	Change Theme
The teacher	Updating knowledge and attitudes
The environment	Provisioning
The child	Re-imaging
The family	Developing partnerships

The confluence of change themes across the curriculum initiatives suggests continuity of core aims for early childhood education in NSW. Each of the major themes occurred in at least two of the frameworks with *provisioning the environment* and *family partnerships* occurring across the three curriculum documents. In the following section, each change domain will be examined, followed by an explanation of the theme that emerged from analysing that domain area.

Curriculum innovation content by change domain - the teacher

Teachers are central to many change processes in education (Fullan, 1993a). Their role is to action changes that improve outcomes within each domain. Individually, each curriculum innovation makes a number of suggestions related directly to changes teachers could undertake (see Table 2).

Table 2: Change Domain – The Teacher

Literacy (Arthur et al., 2001)	Pedagogy (Stonehouse, 2001)	Health (Hayden et al., 2002)
The teacher should:		
<i>Adopt contemporary theories of literacy learning (p.7) ie. view literacy as a social practice</i>	<i>Extend from the traditional child-centered approach...to child-in –the-context- of – relationships centered approach</i>	<i>Become familiar with the concept of health promotion (p.10)</i>
<i>Support emergent literacy (p.18) and practice critical literacy (p.152)</i>	<i>(p.22) Discard notions of the generic ‘ideal child’ (p.53)</i>	<i>Extend responsibility of role beyond safety and nutrition to health promotion (p.5)</i>
<i>Accept a broader base of literacy texts (p.72)</i>	<i>View each child as an individual (p.56)</i>	<i>Develop and sustain linkages with all health services providers (p.41)</i>
<i>Integrate literacy throughout the program (p.127)</i>	<i>Identify each child’s strengths and interests (p.56)</i>	<i>Establish a health promotion team (p.78)</i>
<i>Scaffold literacy understandings (p.151)</i>	<i>Plan and forecast possibilities with emphasis on provisions and critical reflection (p.136)</i>	
<i>Use small groups and pairs (p.10)</i> <i>Plan from observations based on each child’s interests, strengths and emerging understandings (p.9)</i>	<i>Document with children and parents (p.134)</i> <i>Work with other staff to share ideas and problems, and where there is sufficient confidence to expose one’s own practice to the scrutiny of others.(p.95)</i>	
<i>Promote and facilitate collaboration and transition between the e/c setting, schools and families (p.7)</i>	<i>Share power with parents within professional partnerships (p.79)</i>	

Within the domain of the teacher, the underlying theme arising across the three curriculum documents related to realigning the knowledge and attitudes of early childhood teachers with emerging early childhood theories. Utilising MacNaughton’s (2003) positions on curriculum as “conforming to society” a technical approach, “reforming society” a practical approach or “transforming society” a critical approach, revealed that each curriculum was underpinned by a different philosophical approach. The approach of the health curriculum was for teachers to ‘conform’ to the medical model of health through health promotion practices. The pedagogy curriculum with its emphasis on empowering each child within “the practice of relationships”, reflects a moderate or ‘reforming’ role for teachers and curriculum. The

literacy curriculum, however, challenged teachers to critically reframe and ‘transform’ their literacy practices for all children in order to confront inequities. Conceptually, teachers were being guided to develop curriculum within differing paradigms.

Change theme: updating knowledge and attitudes

Each curriculum initiative was underpinned by theories in early childhood education current at the time of document development. The Literacy framework (Arthur et al., 2001) was the most explicit in nominating and explaining three current theories in literacy learning to be adopted by teachers. The Pedagogy Framework (Stonehouse, 2001) discussed current theories on pedagogy in a separate rationale document (Duffie, 2001). The Health framework (Hayden et al., 2002) did not explicitly reveal theory but interwove the importance of relationships within health promotion activities.

The majority of changes and strategies suggested in each of the curriculum documents have elements reflecting constructivist (Bruner, 1960; Bruner & Haste, 1987) and socio-cultural perspectives of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Aspects also reflected curriculum approaches such as the anti-bias curriculum (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Taskforce, 1989); the emergent curriculum (Jones & Nimmo, 1994; Nimmo, 2002); the project approach (Katz & Chard, 2000) and global curriculum influences such as the Reggio Emilia experience (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) and the cross-cultural curriculum Te Whariki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996). The Pedagogy document (Stonehouse, 2001) included the “goals and learning outcomes” from Te Whariki as an appendix, suggesting a close association with its philosophy.

Thus the content of the curriculum frameworks reflected current international trends in early childhood education (Fu, 2003; Rudick & Nyisztor, 1997; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Although these theories had been espoused in academia for well over a decade, they were being presented to the early childhood field in New South Wales through curriculum initiatives. Usefully, by the time the curriculum documents were developed, many early childhood teachers who had participated in continuing professional development and recent graduates would have had some familiarity with a number of these conceptualisations.

Variability in theoretical underpinning of initiatives, however, is a challenging factor for organisational change as it may exert subtle pressure on the overall curriculum

implementation process (Fullan, 1993a). A further variability that impacts on change is a teacher’s beliefs. Where a teacher’s beliefs are in close alignment with the theoretical underpinning of a curriculum document, a teacher’s practice can be affirmed (Stonehouse, 2001), change is facilitated and a higher level of change can be achieved (Brighton & Hertberg, 2004). Thus teachers’ beliefs can facilitate or act as a barrier to change and this can affect the learning environment they create. It is that domain of change to which we now turn.

Curriculum innovation content by change domain – the environment

In the last decade, there has been increasing emphasis on the significance of the environment on a child’s learning experiences (Curtis & Carter, 1996, 2003; Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998; Wellhousen & Crowther, 2004). Recognising this shift in thinking, rather than adding provisions for the early childhood environment, the three curriculum initiatives suggested *reconceptualising* the role of the environment (see Table 3).

Table 3: Change domain – The environment

Literacy (Arthur et al., 2001)	Pedagogy (Stonehouse, 2001)	Health (Hayden et al., 2002)
<i>The environment should:</i>		
<i>Contain a broader range of Literacies including: a diversity of books, include popular culture for example, Disney, and technology for example, Gameboys (p.72).</i>	<i>Reflect its position as major contributor to children’s experience (p.101)</i>	<i>Contain a display of health information pamphlets and listings of community health providers</i>
<i>Support and include home languages (p.34)</i>	<i>Contain provisions, experiences and opportunities rather than activities (p.111)</i>	<i>Model a healthy and hygienic environment for children and families (p.15).</i>
<i>Support environmental texts(p.16)</i>	<i>Support experiences that are open ended and child directed (p.114)</i>	
<i>Contain the tools of literacy – paper pens, postage stamps (p.59)</i>	<i>Have a day structure that supports a natural rhythm with chunks of time (p.117)</i>	
<i>Integrate literacy through the provision of the artefacts of literacy – docketts, timetables, maps, pictures (p.59)</i>	<i>Contain provisions that encourage choice and supports relationships (p.102).</i>	

Change theme: provisioning

Although each of the curriculum initiatives suggested a range of provisions, the theme that emerged reflected a philosophy of the ‘environment as teacher’ (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998). The underlying philosophy of these changes revealed the type of teacher the environment was to be.

The health provisioned environment presented a ‘conforming’ (MacNaughton, 2003) environment for early childhood services with health information and practices reflective of a community health context. The Pedagogy framework (Stonehouse, 2001) addressed multiple aspects of the environment, advocating the wide powers of the environment, “A rich, well set up environment empowers children to engage independently with materials and equipment and frees the professional to engage in interactions that support relationships and that support children as capable learners” (p.103), thus reflecting a constructivist pedagogy or ‘reforming’ (MacNaughton, 2003) environment.

The Literacy framework (Arthur et al., 2001) proposed that the environment should contain a broad range of literacy artefacts reflecting and respecting the diversity of society’s textual, visual and cultural literacies in a way that would ‘transform’ (MacNaughton, 2003) the environment. From this poststructural perspective, “all children have the right to access literacy pathways.... In this way literacy is a social justice issue.” (Arthur et al., 2001, p.7). Within this environment is nested the child, and the focus of the discussion will now turn to that change domain and its associated theme.

Curriculum innovation content by change domain – the child

Curriculum frameworks can be an influence on attitudes, practice, routines and behaviours that ultimately impact on the child. The Literacy framework (Arthur et al., 2001) (see Table 4) reflected the ideals of the community-centred curriculum such as selecting literacies related to all children’s interests and cultures. It also encouraged early childhood teachers to value home literacy experiences as well as literacy linked to popular culture. The Pedagogy framework (Stonehouse, 2001) expanded on this orientation, encompassing an *image of the child* as a unique, powerful and active learner (Gandini, 1993). This conceptualisation views a child in terms of strengths, rather than deficiencies and values each child as a capable individual. In contrast, the Health framework (Hayden et al., 2002) presented strategies that

focused on developing relationships with parents and community health personnel. Although, in a direct sense the child was absent, it was evident that the child would strongly benefit from the results of these strategies. This subtle yet powerful change of view of the child in two curriculum documents aimed to strengthen the child’s place in their learning and emerged as the theme for the changes located in the child’s domain.

Table 4: Change domain – The child

Literacy (Arthur et al., 2001)	Pedagogy (Stonehouse, 2001)	Health (Hayden et al., 2002)
Decision making for the child should:		
<i>Link literacy experiences in the setting to home experiences (p.83)</i>	<i>Reflect the child as an active contributor to own development and learning (p.51)</i>	
<i>Support home languages</i>	<i>Acknowledge each child as unique (p.53)</i>	
<i>Plan for the acquisition of English (p.113)</i>	<i>Support young children as tireless investigators, explorers, experimenters and problem solvers (p.60)</i>	
<i>Integrate literacy experiences into all play areas (p.127)</i>	<i>Promote collaboration and group projects overtly as good ways of working and playing (p.71)</i>	

Change theme: re-imagining

The Literacy (Arthur et al., 2001) and Pedagogy frameworks (Stonehouse, 2001) reflected the essence of this re-imagining of the child in early childhood education by etching this change onto the lens through which early childhood teachers, families and the community view the child. The lens becomes multi-focal when viewing the child, magnifying the child’s strengths and interests and highlighting the child’s perspective. Thus, the developmental model that highlights deficiency and inability becomes minimised. The image as expressed by Gandini (1993) - that children, “are strong, rich and capable. All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity, and interest in constructing their learning, negotiating with everything their environment brings to them” (p. 5) - is adopted.

Another aspect of this theme is the refocusing of power in the child/adult learning relationship. There are anecdotal reports of a misunderstanding of this movement of power, with some educators believing they are to move to the far end of the spectrum and only follow interests initiated by the child. The literature underpinning the Pedagogy framework (Stonehouse, 2001), for example Rogoff, Matusov and White (1996), however, view the

position of power as being at the mid-point in the spectrum with children and early childhood teachers as co-learners, co-decision-makers, co-researchers and co-evaluators. This sharing of power occurs where the child is seen to have a more powerful role in the child/adult learning relationship, aligning with Vygotsky's (1998) facilitative, scaffolding relationship. The Pedagogy framework (Stonehouse, 2001) stresses this perspective by stating; "It is important for children to see themselves as powerful, valued, and as constructive contributors to their community" (p.53).

Through the wide angled lens of each curriculum framework, the child was seen not as a single entity, but as embedded in a family and a community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From this perspective, family members are engaged and family activities, beliefs and concerns are embraced within the early childhood setting. This view recognises, celebrates and honours the individuality of the children's family structure, culture, religion and parenting beliefs (Fleer & Robbins, 2006). In Australia's diverse society, this is an important construct to be embedded early in a child's life experiences and to ripple through early childhood education to the community. Through these changes in conceptualising the child's domain, families are also embraced; the building of this relationship is examined in the change domain of the family.

Curriculum innovation content by change domain – The family

The curriculum initiatives all had a focus on families. If these changes were enacted, families could expect to experience more informed and collaborative relationships with the early childhood setting (see Table 5). The Literacy framework (Arthur et al., 2001) sought to build the information exchange between each family and the setting. This could be achieved with a flow of knowledge outward from the setting to support literacy practices within the home environment accompanied by a flow of home literacy practices inward that could be integrated into the setting. The Pedagogy framework (Stonehouse, 2001) also valued this form of exchange, but conveyed a deeper form of collaboration between early childhood settings and families. It discounted the current perspective of parent 'involvement' as an optional status of helper, replacing it with 'partnerships' that broadened family participation to include a position of influence on curriculum. The Health framework (Hayden et al., 2002) focussed on facilitating the collaboration of a child's health professional team as well as building parent-to-parent relationships. Underlying this new status in each curriculum

initiative, was an element of power sharing between early childhood settings and families; this emerged as the change theme for this domain.

Table 5: Change domain – The family

Literacy (Arthur et al., 2001)	Pedagogy (Stonehouse, 2001)	Health (Hayden et al., 2002)
<i>Changes for families should:</i>		
<i>Support the exchange of literacy information between staff and families (p.8)</i>	<i>Embrace a shared vision and sense of common purpose among parents and professionals (p.93)</i>	<i>Create and sustain parent partnerships - “real sharing of information between all parties” (p.23)</i>
<i>Build on literacy information from home (p.59)</i>	<i>Welcome diverse views and perspectives as a catalyst for generating better ideas and solutions to problems (p.93)</i>	<i>Support family health meetings</i>
<i>Build the literacy knowledge of parents (p.9)</i>	<i>Firmly embed the children’s service in the community so families are more aware of what is available to support them (p.96)</i>	<i>Facilitate parent networks</i>
<i>Support planning in partnership with families (p.34)</i>	<i>Promote the sharing of records with families, for parents to reflect on and offer constructive criticism and suggestions (p.13)</i>	<i>Buddy parents</i>
		<i>Morning teas and Parent shared tasks (p.33)</i>

Change theme: Developing partnerships

Developing and sustaining a partnership with families was promoted by each of the curriculum initiatives. Creating partnerships with parents was a regulatory requirement, through the development of “local policy that deals with ... parental involvement” (NSW Department of Children’s Services, 2004) as well as being required in QAIS, Area 2: Partnerships with Families (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2001). The curriculum initiatives promoted partnerships that, for example, encouraged and supported communication that was open and two-way, focussed on the child’s learning and where power was shared. These characteristics reflect principles from organisational theories such as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and learning organisations (Senge et al., 1999). Each of these organisational models, when applied in education systems, encourages family participation in all areas of knowledge sharing and decision making. It is one where parents and teachers “work together to create a unity of purpose” (Hord, 1995, p.90) or shared vision.

This embracing of the families' perspectives mirrors the movement of power in the relationship between the early childhood teacher and the child. The early childhood teacher is to not only be receptive to families, but to proactively build a relationship with all parents and adult carers. Further, there is a movement in the focus of the parent's role, from peripheral tasks, such as management committee, fundraising or maintenance tasks to partnerships in the learning relationship in the classroom (MacNaughton, 2003). A high value was placed on deep and meaningful family partnerships by all the curriculum initiatives.

Conclusion

Australian governments attempt to assure quality of early childhood environments through a multi-layered strategy, each encouraging a process of organisational change. At a base level, the regulatory environment addresses minimum structural components; at the second level of systemic control, quality assurance, is intended to address process components. The third level of guidance expands government influences on quality to curriculum, and can be investigated with particular reference to the domains of the teacher, the environment, the child, and the family.

This investigation of three NSW curriculum initiatives revealed that there were recurrent themes threaded through the documents contributing to their underlying philosophical positions (conforming, reforming, transforming approaches as defined by MacNaughton, 2003). Although the implementation strategies varied, the change themes: updating knowledge, provisioning the environment, re-imagining the child and family partnerships revealed components of the NSW government's change directions. Each of the themes reflected key principles of internationally recognised theories influencing early childhood education. It would seem that these ideas had permeated this region and were embedded in government documents designed to initiate curriculum change. These documents represent government investment in early childhood education quality improvement through organisational change processes.

Notes on Contributors

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