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SUPPORT FOR MOTHERS BY EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

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ABSTRACT

Mothers have been involved with early childhood centres since their inception. Apart from obvious benefits for their children this liaison has also been important for mothers through gains in parenting knowledge, increased confidence and personal wellbeing. The present study argues that this is pertinent to appropriate and focused support being crucial for mothers at the life stage of adjustment to early parenting when disruption of networks has occurred. As well, it reflects the responsibility of institutions such as early childhood centres to fulfil these needs in a society where traditional support has fragmented.

The study was designed to explore ways in which support mechanisms operated in four different early childhood services, through the medium of interviews. The unique findings in the study culminated in six propositions that showed support to be a product of mothers' own activity in building relationships and contributing to their centre community. At the same time irrespective of service type all centres operated upon the basis of both formal and informal systems of support. Consequently, whilst mothers' activities were most favoured by socially co-operative environments, they were opportunists in both systems. However, of major concern was that the informal systems were the most effective, as the statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices (Ministry of Education, 1996) exhorts staff to consider parent interactions as partnerships and The Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education (Ministry of Education, 2002) has a vision of socially co-operative practices. Teachers rather than being unwilling to establish more collaborative styles of leadership were hampered by a lack of confidence in working with parents. Difficulties were the consequence of professional attitudes to trained knowledge, unmodified by the benefits of training to facilitate adults. Addressing these issues will not only help teachers to develop more collaborative systems that will facilitate support for mothers, but it will also ensure partnerships that make better use of their services to the mutual benefit of early childhood centre communities.

Dedication:

To my parents who through traumatic and changing times gave me my first experiences in the art of parenting helping to make me what I was before I became what I am.

To mothers everywhere.

Acknowledgements

This study is about support, and the value of social networks. In the same way this study itself has only been brought to completion through the contribution of many people. Whether their help has been momentary or sustained it has been a necessary part of the endeavour. I acknowledge particularly my supervisors Professor Joy Cullen (Massey University) and Dr. Judith Loveridge (formerly of Massey, now of Victoria University) for their guidance, support and expertise in helping me to bring the project to its conclusion. As well my thanks go to all the mothers and teachers who participated by giving substance to the study through their time and insights. At the same time my grateful thanks go to my dear husband Jan Thesing and my family for their support and tolerance during my frequent absences from family life. I extend my thanks and appreciation to colleagues, friends, inspirers and all those who have provided practical help without whom there would have been intolerable gaps.

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GLOSSARY

Centre:	Denotes an early childhood service, licensed to provide education and custodial care for children up to age five years. In this study it refers to four types of community based organisations.
Community kindergarten:	This is a centre that provides sessional care and education, being a non-profit organisation administered by a management committee within community premises.
Education Review Office (ERO)	The government office (established 1989 at the time of educational reforms) that is responsible for evaluating the performance of early childhood centres and schools to ensure continued accountability.
Free kindergarten:	This is a centre that operates under the auspices of the Free Kindergarten Association in New Zealand. It is non-profit making and offers sessional education programmes.
Maori:	A member of the "tangata whenua" the original people to settle in New Zealand.
Ministry of Education:	A government organisation that in 1989 replaced the former Department of Education, and is responsible for ensuring national educational policies are implemented as well as overseeing finances.
Playcentre:	This is a centre that operates under the auspices of the New Zealand Playcentre Federation, also a non-profit group it offers training for parents, who manage the centre as a parent-co-operative.
Playgroup:	A regular, informal, parent-led initiative where parents meet with their children (usually license exempt). However, in the study because the playgroup operated under the license of a community kindergarten it was subject to review by the Education Review Office (ERO).
Social capital:	Resources gained and exchanged through social networks
Statement of Desirable Objectives (DOPs):	Articulates the government's expectations (through the Ministry of Education) of early childhood providers in terms of guiding principles and goals.

Te Whaariki	This is a Maori expression, translated it refers to an "interwoven mat" that was selected as the title for the bi-cultural Early Childhood Curriculum document used in licensed early childhood centres (Ministry of Education, 1996).
Teacher:	Denotes a qualified person who teaches and has attained the status of a Diploma of Teaching (ECE) and who is employed to teach in an early childhood centre.