

Pondering Policy and Parental Perspectives: How Parents View Their Role in Shaping Early Childhood Public Policy

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the role of Australian parents in early childhood education and care (ECEC), in particular, their role in shaping ECEC public policy. The paper reports the findings of a study investigating the different ways in which a group of parents viewed and experienced this role. Set against a policy backdrop where parents are positioned as *consumers* and *participants* in ECEC, the study employed a phenomenographic research approach to describe this role as viewed and experienced *by* parents. The study identified four logically related, qualitatively different ways of constituting this role among this group of parents, ranging from *no role in shaping public policy* (the no role conception) to *participating in policy decision-making*, particularly where policy was likely to affect their child and family (the participating in policy decision-making conception). The study provides an insider-perspective on the role of parents in shaping policy and highlights variation in how this role is constituted by parents. The study also identifies factors perceived by parents as influencing their participation and discusses their implications for both policy and practice.

Introduction

In a significant Canadian study some years ago, Pence and Goelman (1987) drew attention to the absence of parent voice in early childhood education and care (ECEC).¹ Depicting parents as 'silent partners', they concluded that "to better understand ECEC, these silent partners must be heard" (p. 17). Perceiving this to be a continuing problem in many countries, including Australia, a study was undertaken to investigate the role of parents in Australian ECEC. The aim of the study was to uncover the role of parents in using ECEC services and in shaping ECEC public policy, as constituted by a group of parents, and to reveal possible variation therein. This paper reports on the findings of the second part of this study, identifying the qualitatively different ways that parents constituted their role in shaping ECEC public policy.

¹ The term early childhood education and care (ECEC) is adopted from the OECD report, *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care* (2001b). In this paper, it refers to all formal early childhood services providing education and care for children under compulsory school age (e.g. child care, family day care, kindergarten, preschool and the preparatory year currently being introduced in Queensland).

The study was located in a policy context of systemic reform, a process that commenced in Australia during the 1990s and remains ongoing. During this period, there have been many critical changes in the nature and provision of ECEC services in Australia, ostensibly to respond to diverse and changing family needs. A review of public policy from 1990 to the present, at both national and state/territory levels, provides insight on new service directions. These include: an unprecedented increase in the number of work-related child care places, supported by significant expansion in private for-profit services; escalating competition within the market; and interest in more integrated approaches to the provision of child and family services (Council of Australian Governments Child Care Working Group 1995; Economic Planning Advisory Commission 1996; Queensland Government 1999; Senate Employment Education and Training Reference Committee 1996).

Promoting the need for flexible and responsive services to meet different family needs, contemporary policy invokes concepts of consultation, collaboration and involvement of *key stakeholders* (e.g. service operators, staff, government agencies and parents) in all aspects of ECEC. Within this context, there is a renewed emphasis on the role of parents in ECEC, not just in the day-to-day life of their child's service(s), but also in public policy. For example, the Australian Government's *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* (2000; 2004) articulates themes of 'working together', 'empowering families' and 'local solutions to local problems'. In a similar vein, the *Queensland Child Care Strategic Plan* (Queensland Government 1999) urges closer attention to (parent) consumer needs and expectations, and advocates a stronger role for parents in planning child care services, developing quality standards, and monitoring service compliance with these standards. Observing parallel trends in the international arena, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2001b) recently concluded that the role of parents in ECEC is expanding and becoming more formalised.

Now, while the public policy focus on parents in ECEC may be considered overdue in Australia, and in spite of the emphasis on parent and community involvement, this has been primarily a *top-down* (i.e. centrally-driven) policy process, allowing only limited consideration of parent views. In the absence of specific research evidence, the role of parents has been *constructed* by policy-makers, and shaped by the dominant policy discourse of the day. For example, the discourse of market theory and rise of the ECEC "quasi-market" (Marginson 1997, p. 6) has strengthened the view of parents as *consumers* of ECEC services. As such, parents are positioned as individual consumers whose key role is to select the *right* service(s) for their child and family. While the ECEC quasi-market and notion of parent as consumer prevails in Australian ECEC policy, an ascending discourse of parent and community participation is challenging this rather limited view of parents in ECEC. While arguably more ambiguous in meaning, the view of parents as *participants* tends to emphasise shared community, collective decision-making and participatory citizenship (Epstein 1990). Parent participation discourse extends beyond service choice to promote a partnership approach to service provision, and,

increasingly, parents “taking part” in decision-making (Rizvi 1995, p. 18). As can be seen, each of these perspectives promotes a particular way of fulfilling the role of parent in ECEC. Although seemingly contradictory, *consumer* and *participant* discourses co-exist in Australian ECEC policy, resulting in potentially conflicting images of parents in ECEC.

Moreover, despite a market-driven approach to service development (Brennan 1998), there is limited research identifying Australian parent views and experiences of ECEC services. The fact is that little is known about how parents view themselves in relation to ECEC, particularly with respect to involvement in public policy. In contrast to the paucity of research identifying parent views and experiences, there is an expanding international research base arguing the benefits of parent involvement and promoting participative practices in education and schooling (Crozier 2000; Epstein et al. 1997; Hallgarten 2000; Haynes 1997; Limerick and Nielsen 1995; Vincent 1996, 2000) and in ECEC (Galinsky et al. 1990; Henry 1996; McCain and Mustard 1999; OECD 2001b; Powell 1989; Pugh 1985). However, while providing useful insights, these tend to offer a *professional* or *expert* perspective on the role of parents in schools and ECEC. The focus is most often what parents do (or should do) as opposed to how parents view and experience their role. The result is what phenomenographer Marton (1981) labeled a *first-order* or from-the-outside perspective, and what Sandberg (1994) referred to as an *indirect* description, leading the researcher to describe the role of parents independent of the parent who performs the role.

On the basis of mostly indirect descriptions, policy-makers and researchers worldwide are constructing an enhanced role for parents in education and ECEC. Supporting this goal, governments in Australia, at both national and state/territory levels, have implemented a range of strategies designed to provide parents with information about ECEC and to access their views and experiences of ECEC. These strategies include: the establishment of telephone hotlines and a range of information resources; the inclusion of parents on representative *industry* forums; an increased focus on parents in public consultation; and a small number of research projects surveying parent views and experiences (Department of Community Services 2000; Greenblat and Ochiltree 1993; Queensland Government 1999; QUT Collaborative Research Group 2003). However, evidence to date suggests that such strategies have met with only limited success. Representative structures have been criticised as being restrictive and not truly representative, parent participation in industry consultation remains relatively low, and, while involving a larger number of parents, the use of surveys, with predetermined categories, provides a surface-level and interspersed picture of parent views and experiences (Irvine 2002).

In light of this, some fundamental questions need to be asked. How do parents in Australia view and experience their role in shaping Australian ECEC policy? Do different parents view and experience this role in different ways? How do parent views and experiences compare with current policy

assumptions regarding the role of parents in ECEC? What are the implications of the ways parents view and experience this role for future ECEC policy and practice?

Methodology

The aim of the present study was to identify the qualitatively different ways in which a group of Australian parents constituted their role in shaping ECEC public policy. With this purpose in mind, the study employed a phenomenographic research approach to uncover parent views and experiences, and to identify different ways of experiencing this role. In phenomenography, the unit of research is a human conception or *way of experiencing* something (Marton and Booth 1997; Marton and Pang 1999). The object of research is to discern and make visible variation in ways of experiencing (Præmling 1995; Richardson 1999; Svensson 1997). Focusing on the nature of collective human experience, the idea is not to describe things “as they are”, but to characterise how things “appear to people” (Marton 1988, p. 181), as people are seen to act on the basis of their interpreted meaning (Saljo 1988; Sandberg 1994). Thus, the focus of this type of research is the relation between person (i.e., the experiencer) and the selected phenomenon (i.e. the experience).

In phenomenographic research, conceptions or ways of experiencing are presented as categories of description. Based on the collective experience of those studied, these are constructed by the researcher to illustrate the distinctly different ways of experiencing the phenomenon under investigation. Two key principles underpin this type of research: (1) the belief that, whatever the phenomenon, it is experienced in a limited number of qualitatively different ways; and (2) the categories of description are logically, and, most often, hierarchically related to one another. It is argued that identifying and describing different ways of experiencing the same phenomenon supports a richer understanding of the phenomenon as a whole, in this case, the role of parents in shaping ECEC public policy.

Sample

Twenty-six parents participated in the study. Seeking parents with relevant yet varied experience, the study employed a process of ‘purposive sampling’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The selection of parents was based on three criteria: (1) parents had experience using an ECEC service; (2) children in the family were aged between birth and eight years (to ensure recent experience); and (3) families were connected to a particular Child Care and Family Support Hub. The selected research sample comprised a diverse mix of parents (mothers and fathers, education levels and employment), family structures (single parents and couples, number and ages of children), family cultural backgrounds and family experience using different ECEC services.

Interviews

Data was collected by individual semi-structured interviews. These were conducted in parents' preferred locations, most often the Hub or family home, and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Presented as a 'talk over a cup of coffee and cake', this proved to be a user-friendly data collection strategy in terms of parent time and energy. Most significantly, as opposed to other possible data collection strategies (e.g. written data), individual interviews allowed ongoing clarification of potentially ambiguous concepts such as ECEC policy. Interviews were broadly based on a series of open-ended prompts which were directed toward obtaining individual accounts (Saljo 1997) of the role of parents in shaping ECEC public policy. Parents were asked to talk about (i.e. provide an account of) their views and experiences as parents using ECEC services. All interviews were audio tape-recorded, transcribed and verified by individual parents prior to analysis.

Analysis

At the most basic level, phenomenographic analysis may be condensed to identifying and grouping accounts of different ways of seeing and experiencing particular phenomena (Marton and Booth 1997). Walsh (2000) elaborated on this perspective, describing analysis as a process of "looking into the data to discover what is there ... considering similarities and differences in the data, and then attempting to represent those similarities and differences in ... descriptive categories" (p. 27). In this study, the process of analysis was broadly based on Patrick's (2000) sequence of six steps of phenomenographic analysis. Key steps included: searching the interview transcripts for responses that described perceptions of the role of parents in shaping policy; identifying and sorting these responses in terms of meaning (i.e. the global meaning parents assigned to the role) and structure (i.e., how role aspects came together to determine the role); comparing responses to identify similarities and differences between them; developing draft descriptions of these groupings; and, finally, considering the relation between groupings. While the notion of steps may seem to imply a sequential and linear approach, the process of analysis was iterative and comparative. Throughout this process, I tried to adopt the perspective of "researcher as learner" (Marton and Booth 1997, p. 133), seeking the meaning and structure of the role of parents in ECEC, as constituted by the parents in this study, and, then, the dimensions of variation between different parent conceptions. As is the case with all phenomenographic research, the study aims to 'make visible' variation in human experience, but does not attempt to explain differences in experience.

Results

The iterative process described above resulted in the emergence of four qualitatively different conceptions of the role of parents in shaping ECEC public policy. These were:

- *The no role conception*: the role of parents is seen as having no role in shaping policy (Category A)

- *The raising concerns conception*: the role of parents is seen as being informed about policy that affects their child and family, raising any concerns and/or seeking a change to current or proposed policy (Category B)
- *The having some say conception*: the role of parents is seen as being informed and having some say in policy matters that directly affect their child and family (Category C)
- *The participating in policy decision-making conception*: the role of parents is seen as participating in policy decision-making, particularly where this is likely to affect their child and family (Category D).

Each of these conceptions differs through the meaning parents assigned to their role in shaping policy (i.e., what they saw their role to be), and through the structural aspects which framed and delimited this role.

Category A: No role conception

Parents expressing Conception A perceived no role for themselves in shaping policy. While suggesting that government should seek the views of parents as service users, and that it's good for 'other parents', generally, to have a say in public policy that affects them, these parents saw no role for themselves. Instead, the focus for these parents remained on direct service use. Within this context, the role of parents in shaping policy was delimited to 'looking after your own direct service needs' and this is the distinguishing feature of this conception. Thus the relation between parents and their role shaping policy may be described in terms of perceiving no personal role in this area. This view was revealed through the use of phrases such as [I see my role] 'using the service', 'I probably wouldn't personally' [share views on a proposed service like the prep year], 'maybe not for me' and 'I'm looking after my little space'. While promoting the need for government to consult parents as service users, these parents were not interested in extending their current role as service users, and perceived that parents have little ability to influence policy decisions anyway. Within this category, the role of parents may be seen as passive, in terms of both service use and involvement in policy matters (i.e. using an established service; no role shaping ECEC public policy).

Category B: Raising concerns conception

In contrast to the previous category, parents expressing Conception B perceived they do have a role shaping policy. The focus for these parents was being informed about public policy that affected their child and family, and having a say if unhappy with what was being proposed or had been decided. The role of parents in relation to ECEC public policy was delimited to raising personal concerns and/or seeking change to public policy impacting on their child and family. This problem-orientation towards the role of parents in policy is the distinguishing feature of this conception. Parents expressing this conception indicated they were 'happy to sit down and listen' [to policy proposals] and 'would have a say if they are not happy' [with what was proposed]. Thus, the relation between parents and their role

here may be described in terms of looking out for any problems or areas of personal concern/disagreement, and bringing these concerns to the attention of government (i.e. the role of a basic consumer). In this category, the role of parents may be seen as reactive, and, most often, a response to a negative issue (i.e., seeing what government is offering and having a say if concerned). When not reacting, the role of parents remains passive and dependent on others (e.g. receiving information from government, being given opportunity to have a say). Whether a contributing factor to, or a consequence of this way of experiencing the role of parents, there is also considerable doubt amongst these parents as to whether parents can really influence decision-making or affect any change in policy.

Category C: Having some say conception

As in the previous category, the parents who expressed Conception C perceived a role for parents in shaping policy, reasoning that parents, as service users, should have opportunity to input into government policy, 'if they wish'. Parents expressing this conception delimited and organised their role as 'having some say on policy likely to affect their child and family'. This view of the role of parents in relation to policy was revealed through the use of phrases such as 'parents should have a say' [in policy] or 'have a voice in how it works' and the expressed desire to 'respond to government proposals' and 'comment on drafts' prior to their implementation. Although there are considerable similarities in how the role of parents is seen in Categories B and C, the present conception can be distinguished from the previous one in that the role of parents extends beyond problem identification to broader input (i.e., positive and negative feedback). While continuing to focus on the needs of their own child and family, the role of parents here is also more proactive than in previous categories (e.g., having a say — which includes general feedback and offering suggestions for improvement, participating in a democratic process). Nevertheless, policy development continued to be seen as the province of government and the role of parents was delimited to monitoring and review. In this sense, there also continued to be strong reliance on government in terms of information sharing and facilitating parent input. While expressing the view that parents do have a role to play, some parents in this category perceived this was simply not achievable, believing that their views were not listened to or valued, and that government decided policy.

Category D: Participating in policy decision-making conception

As in Categories B and C, the parents who expressed Conception D perceived a role for parents in shaping policy. However, within this category, there was a subtle shift in focus from having a say in policy matters to participating in policy decision-making. Parents who expressed Conception D delimited and organised their role in terms of 'exercising their democratic right to participate in policy decision-making likely to affect their child and family'. These parents talked about being active and involved, 'knowing what's happening', being 'part of the change process', and 'included in decision-making'. While maintaining a personal focus, unlike previous categories, these parents indicated they

may also comment on policy matters not directly related to their child and family (e.g., where a policy topic relates to a personal interest, passion and/or area of professional expertise). As noted, these parents linked their role to the wider democratic system, and their right as voting citizens and tax payers to share their views on proposed policy generally, and, in particular, where this was likely to affect their family. This slightly broader area of (potential) engagement, underscored by a democratic rights perspective, helps to distinguish this conception from previous conceptions. A further distinction is the noted subtle shift in focus from the process of having a say (evident in Categories B and C) to the outcome of consultation — policy decision-making. Interestingly, within this category, the role of parents is more positive and proactive. In contrast to previous categories, these parents are also more optimistic about the capacity of parents to have their say and to influence policy decision-making. While still perceiving a leading role for government, the role of parents in shaping policy within this category was seen to be realistic and achievable.

These four categories of description reveal variation in the ways that parents in this study constituted their role in shaping policy, with each category describing a distinctly different way of experiencing this role. As noted, the categories are based on the collective experience of this group of parents, As such, they thematise the complex of possible ways of viewing the role of parents in shaping ECEC public policy (Marton 1981) amongst this group of parents. As Bruce (1997) pointed out, this is not to say that some of these parents experience this role in one way and others experience it another way. It is accepted that differences in conceptions can be found both between and within individuals (Marton 1981). This was borne out in the present study, in that many parents expressed more than one conception of their role in ECEC. In addition, the categories of description offer a snapshot in time, and there is evidence to suggest that individual parents may move between categories at different times and under different circumstances. Table 1 provides a summary of the four categories of description, highlighting similarities and differences between the different conceptions and offering illustrative quotes drawn from the interview data.

As noted earlier, in phenomenography, the emerging categories of description are seen to be logically related (i.e. as parts of a whole) (Marton 1994). In fact, Marton and Booth (1997) go one step further to suggest that, as a general rule, the qualitatively different ways of experiencing a particular phenomenon form a hierarchy, the structure of which can be defined in terms of increasing complexity. In this study, analysis revealed four different conceptions of the role of parents in shaping ECEC public policy, and, as suggested by Marton and Booth (1997), the variation between these conceptions can be hierarchically organised. Now it should be noted that the term *hierarchy* in this context

Table 1. Categories of description denoting the role of parents in shaping ECEC public policy

	Category Label	Referential element (What role is conceived as)	Structural elements (How role is conceived)	Parent quotes
A	No role conception	The role of parents is seen as: No role shaping policy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select and use service • No role in shaping ECEC public policy • Good for other parents (service users) to have their say • Question whether parents having a say would make any difference – question whether government listens to parents 	<p>...Like I said, I'm looking after my little space and unless there's a great problem with that, I don't see the need to do anything about it (Father, Interview 11).</p> <p>I probably wouldn't personally [share expressed views on the prep year]... I think it would be a waste of my time, because they [government] don't seem to listen. That's probably why I wouldn't do it (Mother, I:20).</p>
B	Raising concerns conception	The role of parents is seen as being informed about policy that affects their child and family, raising concerns and/or seeking a change to current or proposed policy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on policy that affects their child and family • Receive information – be informed • Be consulted – given opportunity to have a say • See what is being proposed and respond if unhappy (i.e., perceive problems, disagree or want to change something) • Parents can support informed policy (e.g. if don't want a service, save public money) • Want to be heard –views acknowledged • Receive feedback • <i>Question whether parents having their say will make any difference to policy decisions</i> 	<p>I would be happy to sit down and listen to what they've [government] have decided, and, if I wasn't happy with anything ...I would have a say (Mother, I:19).</p> <p>I'd have to see what they're offering. If I had a view... how something could be altered or changed, I'd give my view (Father, I:5).</p> <p>I think everybody would like to have a say [but] ...why even have a say when no-ones going to hear your say (Mother, I:18).</p>
C	Having some say conception	The role of parents is seen as being informed and having <i>some</i> say in policy matters that directly affect their child and family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Focus on policy that affects their child and family</i> • <i>Receive information – be informed</i> • <i>Be consulted – given opportunity to have a say.</i> • Have a say on policy matters likely to affect their child and family, if they wish (including raising concerns, positive feedback, ideas for improvement). • Participate in a democratic process • <i>Parents can support informed policy (e.g. relevant services, save public</i> 	<p>I'd like to come in at the end, and say, well, we don't quite agree with that or we do agree with that, and you've done a really good job (Mother, I:9).</p> <p>...we could be involved in reading [new regulations] and communicating how we feel about them, ways they might be improved or how happy we are with them (Mother, I:17)</p>

	Category Label	Referential element (What role is conceived as)	Structural elements (How role is conceived)	Parent quotes
			<i>money)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Want to be heard – input acknowledged, views taken on board</i> • <i>Receive feedback</i> • <i>Some question whether parents can influence ECEC public policy</i> 	The government probably makes it look like parents can have a say...But I think really they make the decision... you know the individual parent, their say wouldn't count a lot toward the decisions that are being made (Mother, I:17).
D	Participating in policy decision-making conception	The role of parents is seen as participating in policy decision-making, in particular where this is likely to affect their child and family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Focus on policy that affects their child and family - although may share views on other matters of professional or personal interest (i.e. outside own family framework)</i> • <i>Receive information – be informed</i> • Seek information and look for ways to be involved • Participate in ECEC policy decision-making • Exercise their democratic right to participate in decision-making affecting their child and family • <i>Expect feedback on outcomes</i> 	<p>Should parents have a say? Yes. Because it's our taxpaying money that funds the government. Because it's our money, we should be able to say where it's needed (Mother I:8).</p> <p>It's the same as voting. If you don't have a say, you don't participate (Mother, I:26).</p> <p>I think they're [government] starting to listen more, because there's more people who aren't allowing them not to (Mother, I:26).</p>

Note: Structural elements in *italics* repeat from earlier

signifies expanding conceptions of the role of parents and increasing levels of parent participation in policy matters, including decision-making. It is not a moral hierarchy, nor is it an attempt to classify individual parents, to compare groups of parents, or to judge the behaviour of parents (Marton 1981).

It is also not a developmental hierarchy. It does not reflect individual experience and there is no evidence to suggest there is any sort of incremental or linear progression through the various conceptions. Rather, the notion of hierarchy here reflects contemporary social views on parent participation in ECEC, and, ultimately, my value judgment as the researcher, on what constitutes a narrow or broader (i.e. 'higher order') perspective on the role of parents in shaping policy.

Within this context, the categories can be placed in order from the narrowest conception — *the no role conception* (Category A) to the broadest and most participatory conception — *the participating in policy decision-making conception* (Category D). This ordering is based on the following four considerations: (1) some parents perceived no personal role shaping ECEC public policy; (2) excluding Conception A, each of the remaining conceptions incorporates and expands on previous

conceptions; (3) the policy context broadens — from an individual focus to a more collective social focus; and (4) the nature of the role of parents in relation to ECEC policy becomes more proactive and participatory.

Following the practice of a number of phenomenographers (e.g., Boulton-Lewis et al., 2001; Marton et al. 1993), when the categories of description were established, I applied them to the data from which they emerged. To facilitate this, I followed Marton et al's "priority rule", identifying the 'highest order' (or in this case most participatory) conception expressed by individual parents, and allocating them to that category. Table 2 shows the array of parent conceptions of their role in shaping policy according to Marton et al's "priority rule" (1993, p. 295).

Table 2. Most participatory conception of the role of parents in shaping ECEC public policy

Category	No role	Raise concerns/ seek change	Have some say	Participate in policy decision- making
A	11,20			
B		05, 06, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 22		
C			01, 02, 03, 04, 07, 09, 10, 13, 17, 21, 23, 25	
D				08, 24, 26

Discussion

The study was undertaken to enhance understanding of the role of parents in Australian ECEC, in particular the role of parents in shaping ECEC public policy. In light of the predominance of first-order (from-the-outside) perspectives on the role of parents in ECEC, and emphasis on the role parents *should* play (e.g. consumer, participant), the aim was to reveal parents' ways of seeing and experiencing their role.

The main finding of the study was that, amongst this group of parents, this role was experienced in a limited number of qualitatively different ways, spanning 'no role' to 'participating in policy decision-making'. In characterising parent conceptions, the study offers insight on variation in parents' views and experiences, highlighting critical differences between ways of experiencing this role. These related to:

- Whether parents perceived a role (for themselves)
- The motivation for and/or focus of parent participation (i.e. individualistic — benefits to own child, collective — benefits to own child as well as other children and families)
- The nature of the role of parents (i.e. passive, reactive, proactive)
- Perceptions of personal responsibility and the responsibilities of others (i.e. individual responsibilities, shared responsibilities)
- The nature of communication and information sharing (i.e. one-way, two-way)
- Perceptions as to what constitutes parent participation (e.g. receiving information; knowing what's happening for their child, raising concerns, sharing information and expertise and/or taking part in decision-making).

Revealing both 'consumer' and 'participant' perspectives on the role of parents, the study also offers insight on these "two dominant common-sense understandings" (Vincent 2000, p. 2) of the role of parents in ECEC, and the inherent contradictions between them. Of particular interest here is parent discomfort and/or dissatisfaction with the policy view of parents as consumers of ECEC. Many parents in this study rejected this terminology, feeling at best it failed to capture the complexity of their role, and at worst, that it denigrated the important role of parents in ECEC. Such views were particularly evident within the higher-order (more participatory) categories where parents perceived that consumers had no voice and were not involved in decision-making — they simply used the service. Instead, these parents advocated the need for government to promote the important role of parents as *parents* in ECEC. In short, the concept of *parent as consumer using a service* was seen by parents to be at odds with contemporary ideals of parent participation. Such distinctions are worthy of further consideration by policy-makers and government. In light of such distinctions, there is clearly a need to question the future place of marketing concepts and consumer terminology in Australian ECEC policy and practice.

The study findings also challenge any notion of parent participation being a unified concept, revealing a wide range of views on what constitutes participation in ECEC. For some parents, 'knowing what's happening for their child in the service' equated to 'being involved'. For others it was about 'having some say in matters affecting their child and family'. And, for some parents, participation extended to 'taking part' in decision-making. As such, it is suggested that any narrow 'one-size-fits-all' approach to parent participation in ECEC is most likely to fail. Instead, it is suggested that parent *participation*

(involvement or engagement) needs to be defined in the broadest of terms, to reflect the diversity of interpretation and practise among families, and, thereby, encourage and support individual and collective participation in various ways.

Finally, with a view to maximising parent participation in ECEC policy decision-making, the study also identifies factors perceived by parents as influencing their participation in ECEC. Interestingly, while parents viewed and experienced their role in different ways, there was considerable agreement regarding perceived 'enabling factors'. These included:

- *Access to information.* Across the categories of description, parents perceived access to information to be the key to parent participation. As might be expected, there was considerable diversity with respect to preferred approaches to information sharing. While reinforcing the need for clarity, some parents discussed the need for brevity while others were clearly seeking more detailed information. Mindful of such differences, some parents argued the need for 'multi-level' communication strategies to meet different parent needs.
- *Mechanisms in place to enable parents to have a say.* Closely linked to information was the provision of opportunities for parents to share their views on various matters. Again parents varied with regard to their preferred means of consultation, with some promoting the benefits of 'quick and easy' surveys and questionnaires while others liked local meetings where they could get more information. Regardless of personal preferences, the need for 'user-friendly' approaches was reinforced, and once again some parents identified the need for a variety of approaches to suit different parent needs.
- *The provision of feedback and progress updates.* Sharing their expectations of consultation, many parents indicated the need for feedback (i.e., information about the outcomes of consultation, decisions and plans to implement changes). The general view was that if parents invested time and effort in completing surveys or attending public meetings, they were entitled to feedback. This was seen to be a form of acknowledgement, suggesting that parent views were valued and being taken into account, and, thereby, motivating participation. Once again, there were varying views on how feedback might be provided, ranging from individual letters and emails to collective feedback through service newsletters and the public media (depending on the issue).
- *The sense that parent views were being listened to and taken on board* Parents identified the importance of feeling that they were being listened to, that their opinions were valued, and would be considered in relation to decision-making. This was seen to be a critical factor in terms of parent motivation to participate in consultation activities. This is not to say that parents expected their views to be implemented, but considered alongside the views of other parents and stakeholders (e.g. staff/teachers, service providers, researchers). As revealed, many of these parents remained skeptical as to the purpose and impact of policy consultation on decision-making, leading to apathy and feelings of 'why bother'.

- *Family characteristics, including parental employment and young children in the family.* Perhaps, not surprisingly, a number of parents identified lack of time as a barrier to their participation in policy activities. Time pressure was most often linked to parents working as well as to current family circumstances, for example, the birth of a baby or having several young children at home. Notably, there is some evidence to suggest that parent participation may increase as family circumstances change.

With the exception of family characteristics, parents emphasised the role of government in facilitating each of these factors (e.g. providing information, seeking and taking account of parent views).

These factors serve to reinforce the importance of effective strategies to share information and consult with parents on various policy matters. However, in light of the variation of experiences documented, they also highlight aspects of current policy and practice that require further attention. The identified factors also offer new insights on strategies to support parent participation, for example, the emphasis placed by parents on the provision of feedback following consultation. Interestingly, the factors perceived by parents as influencing their participation parallel findings from a recent OECD report (2001a) promoting citizen engagement in public policymaking. Focussing on the role of government, the report targets three key areas for action. It is argued that government needs to: (1) disseminate information on its policy-making; (2) ask for and receive citizens' feedback on policy-making; and (3) promote active participation where citizens actively engage in decision-making and policy-making. This study provides insight on how well government in Australia is doing with respect to these factors, and offers ideas for further improvement.

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