

# **SEVENTH Jean Ferguson OAM Memorial Lecture 2008**

## **Plan it...but they might not come.**

### **Rethinking parent participation in the early years**

**presented by**

**Dr S Irvine**

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Parent participation has been a fundamental tenet of quality early childhood services. From our earliest services, to the current day focus of the Council of Australian Governments, there has been an unwavering emphasis on early childhood professionals working with parents to sustain the best outcomes for children.

Yet, while the overarching focus on parent participation has remained consistent, history reveals a range of different perspectives when it comes to rationale, benefits and practical implementation.

Tonight I plan to reflect on some of these different perspectives.

In the interest of upfront disclosure, I confess some personal baggage in relation to this topic. My own perspectives on parent participation have been shaped by my experience as an early childhood teacher, a policy officer, and a parent using early childhood services. Building on personal interest, this was the focus of my PhD which looked at how parents viewed and experienced their role in using early childhood services. The overarching finding of this study was that parents view and experience this role in different ways. Not rocket science – but a good reason to step away from singular or narrow approaches to parent participation in the early years.

Tonight, my intent is to highlight some of these different perspectives, and how they can influence parent participation. To do this, I am going to look through three different lenses at the issue of parent participation in early childhood services. The lenses that I am applying are:

- early childhood – theory and practice,
- government policy, and
- parent views and experiences.

Through each of these lenses, I am going to look at how the role of parents is viewed and how this impacts on parent participation in early childhood. My aim is not to endorse the right view or best approach to parent participation, but to challenge those working with children and families to recognise, accept and work with different perspectives. My use of the term ‘participation’ draws on the work of Epstein et al., (1997), which suggests that participation spans any and all interactions and activities to facilitate information sharing, involvement of parents in service activities, through to participation in service decision-making.

#### **The Early Childhood lens**

As noted earlier, working in partnership with parents has been a long-standing tenet of quality early childhood services. It is true to say that there are different and changing views on what constitutes parent participation. It is also true to say that the role of parents in early childhood has most often been constructed around the perceived role of the teacher – defined by practitioners and not parents.

Within this context, I have identified two broad perspectives on parent participation in early childhood and I have distinguished these as traditional and contemporary perspectives.

## **Traditional perspective**

The traditional perspective of parent participation is based on the view of ‘teacher as expert’ providing or delivering a service which includes parent education. With the very best of intent, this perspective is evident in many of our earliest services.

Targeting families in need, these services employed qualified professionals to improve outcomes for children. With a focus on holistic child and family needs, and sustainable outcomes, service provision extended to the delivery of parent education.

From its earliest days, Lady Gowrie in Brisbane employed a multi-disciplinary team of professionals (teachers, a registered nurse and a social worker), and offered instruction to mothers on matters of care, education, health and nutrition via mothers groups and home visits. Lillian de Lissa adopted a similar approach in the South Australian Free Kindergartens. Mothers clubs were convened once a month, the primary purpose being to educate the mothers on such topics as child development, diet and hygiene.

Within this traditional model of parent participation, the teacher or qualified professional is generally seen to hold all of the knowledge. The teacher’s role is to share this knowledge with parents and the parent’s role is to learn and improve their parenting knowledge and skills.

The model promotes one-way communication, and is most often based on a deficit view of parenting (ie. seeking to improve parent knowledge and skills and addressing parenting problems).

Within this context, parent participation is strongly defined and controlled by the service.

The teacher as expert model continued for some time.

I can illustrate this with a personal example. In the mid 80s, I was a relatively new teacher working in a state preschool. As the end of the year and transition to school approached, I was concerned about one of the children in my group, a small and quite frail child called Richard. Richard had been born premature, lived with his young single mum, and demonstrated wide ranging developmental delays. With the best of intent, I met with his mother – who I hadn’t seen a great deal and really didn’t have a strong relationship with – to recommend that Richard repeat preschool.

She was devastated, then angry, and ultimately rejected my ‘expert advice’. However, the story doesn’t end there. Having shared information and records with the adjoining school, the principal actually wrote to the mother to advise that he had decided not to accept Richard at school. He instructed her to re-enrol Richard at the preschool.

Now I have no doubt that my professional view regarding Richard’s readiness for school was correct. However, in hindsight, I can also now appreciate the multiple factors influencing his immediate wellbeing at this time. I understand that it was in his best interest to go to school, enabling his mother to seek better employment and support her family. In addition, I hadn’t developed much of a relationship with this mother. I had offered the usual opportunities – special events, parent letters, meetings – which she had not taken up. And, when it came to the end of the year, I was a little anxious, and concentrated on how to deliver my message as opposed to how she might view and experience this.

You will be interested to know that this young mum actually won her case, and the school was required to accept Richard.

Perhaps the greatest limitation of the traditional model of parent participation is the absence of two-way information sharing to support the best decisions.

## **Contemporary perspectives**

More contemporary early childhood practice rests on a strengths-based model, promoting parent partnership and participation. Within this model, there is recognition that both parties hold

important information and that sharing this is of broad benefit to all concerned – the child, family and professionals working with the child and family.

The focus becomes relationship building and two-way meaningful dialogue. The overriding principle is that positive child outcomes can only be achieved and sustained when parents and early childhood professionals value and respect each other's roles, and work together.

Again, practice and research suggest a continuum of parent participation, spanning involvement as prescribed by the service through to participation in all aspects of service delivery, including service decision-making.

I believe that parents need, want and should have a voice in what happens for their child at a service, and feel competent and in control of their child's nurturing and wellbeing.

It is our job to support them in this endeavour.

### **Government perspectives**

The second lens that I wish to apply is Government policy.

A review of Australian early childhood public policy over the past twenty-five years reveals changing views on the role of parents and parent participation in ECEC.

Within this context, there are two dominant perspectives:

- the view of parent as consumer.
- the view of parent as participant.

#### **Parent as consumer**

Take a moment to look at how these policy perspectives position parents and define parent participation.

With the rise of the early childhood mixed market in the 1990s, government policy positioned parents as individual consumers of services. Their primary role being to select the 'right' service for their child. Government policy at this time encouraged parents to shop around and early childhood services to be more customer focused. According to Rizvi (1995), this constitutes a market view of participation where emphasis is placed on the sovereignty of the individual. Services are directly accountable to individual parents (consumers) and the key avenue for parent participation is at the point of selecting or choosing to exit a service.

From a straight market perspective, this is seen to offer a strong mechanism to parents, where good services will flourish and bad services will cease to operate as parents exercise their choices.

There are some positive aspects to this view of parent participation. In particular, the emphasis on promoting informed consumers who have particular rights. In practice, however, there are also significant limitations to this approach. It relies on parents having access to good information, and having real choices in terms of services (not simply between centre 1 or 2 of the local corporate chain). Despite the best economic arguments, many researchers look at this as a weak model of participation where parents are at liberty to choose from what's on offer, but are unable to really influence what is provided.

#### **Parent as participant**

While concepts of market theory and parent-as-consumer remain evident, more recent policy places greater emphasis on democratic participation.

Related social policy promotes themes of consultation, involvement, partnership, and collaboration spanning the design, implementation and evaluation of services. This leads to a renewed emphasis on the role of parents as participants in ECEC. It takes us back to our grass roots. Early childhood services emerged from the community sector and parent participation has been a strong principle underpinning ECEC in Australia.

The push for increased participation is based on research promoting the benefits of this. The general view is that enhanced parent participation yields positive outcomes for all concerned – children, families, staff and service providers, governments and communities.

Identified benefits include:

- knowledge sharing and skill development
- improved relationships and connections
- more relevant and responsive services
- improved job satisfaction for staff in services.

However, to achieve these benefits, it is argued that parent participation needs to extend a voice to parents, promoting two-way meaningful dialogue and participation in service decision-making.

Now, I need to point out that the line between these two policy perspectives is not always as clean cut as I am suggesting here. In fact, frequently, both views sit side by side in contemporary ECEC policy. I originally had some difficulty with this, perceiving some contradiction between the idea of parent as consumer and parent as participant.

While there is clearly tension, I am now thinking that pragmatically both are relevant to our current context. Parents are paying for a service and have particular expectations and rights when it comes to service provision – some of which are enshrined in legislation and related quality standards. Nevertheless, new knowledge and understanding, supports participation beyond the traditional consumer context and policy is looking at ways to promote and facilitate this.

It is therefore not surprising to find both perspectives co-existing in current national ECEC policy. For example:

- The proposed new Accreditation system – with its focus on a 5 star rating system can be linked to the notion of parent as consumer and supporting informed consumer choices.
- The establishment of integrated parent and child centres arguably starts with a consumer focus, but extends to one of parent and community participation and connectedness.

So far we have explored four different perspectives on the role of parents and parent participation in early childhood.

These span traditional and contemporary early childhood views and government policy views positioning parents as consumers and/or participants in early childhood. Significantly, these views are not confined to Australia and are also evident in the international context. Each of these views promotes a particular way of fulfilling the role of parent in ECEC. These are the roles on offer to parents. And each of these views sets a particular framework for parent participation.

Yet, these roles have been constructed for parents by others, with little reference to the views and experiences of parents using ECEC.

## **Parent views and experiences**

Identifying this gap in our knowledge base, I took opportunity through my PhD to examine parent participation through the eyes of parents.

The aim of this research was to enhance understanding of parent views and experiences in early childhood, in particular, how parents viewed and experienced their role in using early childhood services. Recognising diversity in Australian family life, it seems reasonable to expect that different parents may have different views and expectations of their role. These are likely to be influenced by factors including work status, family responsibilities, social class, cultural background and gender. With this in mind, I was particularly interested in identifying and understanding variation in parent views and experiences.

My focus here wasn't to determine the best or one right way to approach parent participation in ECEC. It was merely to better know and appreciate different approaches by different parents.

Given that as a teacher, and a parent, I have my own particular views on this topic, it wasn't easy to suspend my own biases and look objectively at different views and experiences. However, this is what I did, and this is what I am asking you to do tonight.

I would like you to try to set aside your own views, to see different ways of viewing and experiencing parent participation. I want you to simply appreciate these different views and experiences, without casting any judgement on their merit.

## **The study**

The aim of the study was to identify different ways of viewing and experiencing the role of parents. To do this, I used a methodology called phenomenography. Without going into this in great detail, the aim of this approach is to look at similarities and differences in the way that something is experienced by different individuals. Different ways of experiencing are grouped together and then analysed to determine what makes them different. The underpinning rationale is that by understanding different ways of experiencing something, we can develop a richer appreciation of the whole and better ways of working within this context.

The study involved 26 parents (mothers & fathers) with recent experience using ECEC.

In line with my selected methodology, I employed a process of purposive sampling, seeking to maximise variation amongst the parents in my study.

Data were collected by individual semi-structured interviews. All interviews were audio-taped, then transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were subjected to a rigorous process of phenomenographic analysis.

The study identified five categories or qualitatively different ways that parents viewed and experienced their role in using EC services. Each category of description differs through the meaning parents assigned to their role and the way they experienced that role. I need to stress that these categories are based on collective parental views and experiences, grouping together similar views and experiences. Let's take a moment to look more closely at the different ways these parents experienced this role.

### **Category 1**

Parents defined their role as selecting the best service for their child, based on a range of criteria, and then using that service. The distinguishing feature of this category was the focus on service use. This was revealed in responses such as these:

*Make sure I find the best one... one that will be the most for my son.*

*I just pick him up and drop him off...say hello and that's the end of it.*

These parents questioned the notion of any ongoing formal role, beyond making a choice of service. Having selected and enrolled, they expressed reliance on the service for information, in particular if something happens or there is a problem.

In the case of a problem arising, these parents said they would be more likely to change service than raise the problem.

### **Category 2**

Parents defined their role as knowing what is happening for their child in the service. The distinguishing feature of this category was the focus on information and communication (albeit one-way). As in the previous category, these parents sought the best service but identified an ongoing monitoring role. This focus is evident in responses such as these:

*I like to know what's going on. I like to be part of it.*

*First thing I do is ask my children if they've had a happy day... I talk to the carer...normally she will say what they've done. That's how I keep track of it.*

These parents perceived that it was the service provider's role to provide information, but also identified strategies they used to find out what was happening (talk with child, staff, noticeboards, newsletters and visiting the service). They acknowledged they also had information to share but perceived it was the service's responsibility to seek this information.

### **Category 3**

Parents saw themselves as consumers, paying for a service and thereby enacting certain consumer rights. The distinguishing feature of this category is the focus on parent as consumer. As in the previous categories, these parents wanted to find the best service and perceived an ongoing monitoring role.

This view is reflected in statements such as:

*Well, I'm paying for it, so I suppose I am a consumer.*

*I feel if I'm paying for it...and I have a problem, I have the right to stand up and say...fix it, it's not good enough.*

These parents saw themselves as consumers or customers, paying for a service (either directly or indirectly as tax payers). Within this context, they perceived certain consumer rights, in particular, the right to raise issues or concerns relating to their child in the service.

The role of parents was conceived as a reaction to an identified problem with service provision. Parent participation is motivated by and restricted to identifying and raising problems.

### **Category 4**

Parents described their role in terms of a partnership. These parents saw their role as supporting their selected service & having some say in what happens for their child. As in previous categories, these parents sought to find the best service, wanted to know what's happening, and engaged in ongoing monitoring - including raising concerns. The distinguishing feature of this category was a sense of shared responsibility for quality service provision, as revealed in responses such as:

*Helping out...show them support, because your children are with them.*

*I feel more of a partnership rather than a consumer. In a partnership it's equal. With a consumer, you're using...*

These parents perceived they had something to offer (skills, time) and that their contribution made it better for their child and others.

They also perceived their involvement, in various ways, provided enhanced access to information and staff.

### **Category 5**

Parents defined their role as working as a member of the service community, for the benefit of all concerned. Once again, these parents identified similar role aspects to those in previous categories. However, the distinguishing feature of this conception is these parents saw themselves as members of a service community and discussed their role within this context. These parents talked about working together and the benefits of a sense of community, as evidenced in the following responses:

*Being informed and being included in the decision making loop.*

*A really good P&C makes a really good school. It involves all the parents and it provides a sense of community for people. And I think that community helps the kids....*

These parents looked for opportunities to be involved, were proactive in seeking information and sharing their views, and expected to be included in service decision making.

While not suggesting that all parents fit into one of these 5 categories, I would suggest that many here would identify parents who perhaps share similar views. In fact, the study puts forward

something of a continuum of parent participation, spanning no to limited participation to high levels of participation.

The main finding of the study was that these parents viewed and experienced their role in a limited number of qualitatively different ways. In addition, the study revealed varying views as to what constitutes parent participation from a parent's perspective. Running along a continuum of sorts, parent participation was seen to span anything from 'knowing what's happening', to raising concerns, to supporting your service, to working together and taking part in decision making.

## **Conclusion**

So, as promised, I have shared a number of different perspectives on parent participation in early childhood.

We have looked at early childhood perspectives and traditional and contemporary views of parent participation.

We have looked at government policy perspectives and notions of parent as consumer and parent as participant in early childhood.

And, we have looked at the different ways that parents may view and experience parent participation in ECEC, spanning no to little participation to high levels of participation.

Clearly, there are many different perspectives as to what constitutes parent participation in early childhood. On the basis of this, defining parent participation too narrowly or constructing a particular role for parents is likely to have minimal impact. Rather than promoting one right way for parents to act, or providing narrow opportunities for participation, there is a need for a broad and multi-layered approach to parent participation in ECEC.

Such an approach would recognise and respond to the different ways that parents view and experience their role and would seek to optimise parent participation in a range of ways. It would be based on the evidence that the vast majority of parents want the best for their children, are interested in knowing what is happening for them, and perceive they have information to share about their children.

Recognising different parent views and experiences in ECEC, the focus becomes respecting and working with difference. The goal being to find ways to optimise participation, while accepting that this will be different for different parents. And, accepting that this is okay – and by no means an indication of parent interest or commitment to their child or service.

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