Global Studies of Childhood

Partnerships in Early Childhood Education and Care: empowering parents or empowering practitioners

ELIZABETH ROUSE
School of Education, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT Research acknowledges that outcomes for young children are enhanced when effective partnerships are developed between educators and families. The Australian Early Years Learning Framework provides direction for the professional practice of early childhood educators by acknowledging the importance of educators working in partnership with families. In the Victorian state-based early years framework, family-centred practice has been included as the practice model. Family-centred practice has as its core a philosophy of professionals supporting the empowerment of parents as active decision makers for their child. The early childhood education and care sector in Australia, however, is made up of a workforce which is largely perceived as being undervalued as a profession. This raises questions as to the capacity of these educators to support the empowerment of parents when they themselves are coming from a position of disempowerment due to their professional status. This article reports on findings from a small-scale study of childhood educators working in a long day-care setting which aimed to identify perceptions of the partnerships that exist between themselves and parents. In the course of the investigation, it became evident that some of educators felt disempowered in the relationships that exist with some families.

Introduction

There has been considerable research undertaken over the past few years that has explored the value of partnerships between educators and families for improving outcomes in learning and development for children (Epstein, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2004; Knopf & Swick, 2006; Tayler, 2006; Duncan, 2007; Ashton et al, 2008; Jinnah & Walters, 2008; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). In Australia, this research has influenced the development of key practice principles for educators working across the early childhood education and care sector. The national framework that guides the practice of all early childhood educators (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) identifies partnerships with parents as one of the key principles underpinning practice for educators in early childhood education and care settings. At a more local level, in the state of Victoria a framework has been developed to frame professional practice and create a common approach among all early childhood professionals working in Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009). While the development of this more localised framework mirrored that of the national, the Victorian framework has included family-centred practice as its model of partnership for engaging and collaborating with families. While family-centred practice as a model focuses on supporting the empowerment of parents as key decision makers, this article argues that it is through empowered professionals that parents are assisted to become active and equal decision makers.

This article reports on findings from a small study of a group of childhood educators working in an urban long day-care setting. A key focus of the study was to identify how these educators reflected on their understanding of family-centred practice, and how they believed they were implementing this model in their work with families. Preliminary analysis of the interviews

identified that while each of the participants felt they were implementing family-centred practice, the educators did not always feel empowered partners in the relationships they held with some families.

The Literature

Partnerships have been identified as collaborative relationships, characterised by shared decision-making, mutual respect, equality, dignity, trust and honesty (Johnson, 2000; Dunst, 2002; Blue-Banning et al, 2004; Craft-Rosenberg et al, 2006; Dempsey & Keen, 2008; Madsen, 2009; Alasuutari, 2010). Dunlap and Fox (2007, p. 277) describe partnerships as also entailing a clear and strong commitment by both parties and an understanding of each party's circumstances and roles. Trust has been identified as the characteristic most highly ranked by both families and professionals as being of most importance in a partnership, followed by mutual respect, open communication and honesty (Dunst, 1994, cited in Keen, 2007, p. 340). It is within this understanding that family-centred practice as a model of partnership is being positioned.

Family-Centred Practice

Family-centred practice is a model of partnership that has been implemented across early childhood intervention programs in the state of Victoria since the mid 1990s. It is underpinned by the philosophy that families should be empowered decision makers for their children, in partnership with the professionals (Brown et al, 1993; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Allen & Petr, 1998; Raghavendra et al, 2007). The key characteristics of family-centred practice reflect those of a broader partnership theory; however, it is the notion of professionals supporting families to be empowered which sets this model as distinct when examining it in a broader partnership context. Family-centred practice has its foundations in the movement away from a medical model of service provision for children with disabilities and complex medical needs which began in the USA in the late 1970s (Brewer et al, 1989). It is built on a concept that parents come to the relationship from a position of disempowerment, seeking help from the professionals to access services to assist them in caring for their child at home (Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Dunst, 2010). It was seen as a role of the professional working with the family to empower them as key partners in decision-making regarding care and intervention for their child, and in identifying and accessing necessary services (Brown et al, 1993; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Allen & Petr, 1998; Raghavendra et al, 2007). Professionals are usually highly qualified and experienced health or specialist practitioners and, in the context of family-centred practice, are described as 'help-givers', while the families are seen as 'help-seekers' (Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Davis et al, 2002; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Dunst, 2010). In the context of a broader early childhood education and care sector, most families, however, are not seeking help from the professionals, but, in contrast, are often confident and in many cases well-informed consumers of services which are usually provided by educators with minimal levels of qualifications.

Empowerment

Empowerment is central to family-centred practice. The term 'empowerment' is widely used across a range of human services disciplines as a desirable outcome of service practice (Dempsey & Foreman, 1997, p. 287). In the context of family-centred practice, empowerment can be seen as a process whereby individuals access knowledge, skills and resources that enable them to gain positive control and improve the quality of their lifestyle (Singh, 1995, p. 13). Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) discuss empowerment as an individual's capacity for decision-making and problem-solving. Empowerment has also been defined as 'the attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours associated with perceptions of control, competence, and confidence' (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007, p. 306). Thompson et al (1997) also present a view of empowerment as being a construct which involves individuals in determining their own future, and where individuals are confident they have the information and problem-solving skills necessary to deal with challenging situations.

Thompson et al (1997, p. 100) see it as the role of professionals to assist parents to become empowered by sharing information and engaging them as partners in shared decision-making.

Dempsey and Foreman (1997) discuss empowerment from a psychological construct based on the work of Zimmerman (1990, 1995). This approach refers to empowerment at an individual rather than at an organisational or community level, and will usually include a combination of self-acceptance and self-confidence and the ability to assertively take a role in controlling resources and decision-making (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Zimmerman, 1995). The approach taken by Zimmerman proposes a number of components that need to be present when empowerment is evident. These include participation and collaboration, strong self-efficacy and a sense of control. Psychological empowerment is also seen as a concept by which people gain control over their lives (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 570).

Empowerment as it applies to family-centred practice, however, centres on the notion that we all have existing strengths and capabilities, as well as the capacity to become more competent (Rappaport, 1981; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Boehm & Staples, 2004), but that while families possess some level of strength and competence, they still need help from the professionals to access resources and participate in decision-making (Dunst et al, 1988). This concept has created a context in which the professionals are viewed as the 'help-givers' and the parents as the 'help-seekers' (Davis et al, 2002; Nachshen, 2004; Dunst, 2010). It suggests a level of empowerment existing with the professionals, while the parents are seen as needing to be supported to become empowered (Dunst et al, 1988). This concept of 'help-giver' and 'help-seeker' as discussed in this literature presents a context of inequality, with the professionals coming from a position of empowerment and the parents of relative disempowerment.

A further view of empowerment can be found when examining empowerment theory through a constructivist lens. Within this context, it has been argued that empowerment can mean different things to different people, as determined by their past experiences, across time and settings and the population that is targeted (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995; Foster-Fishman et al, 1998). Positioning empowerment within a constructivist framework provides an important platform from which to view empowerment as it sits within family-centred practice. The constructivist view identifies empowerment of the individual as being determined by the sociocultural and ecological context in which the individual exists and the experiences drawn upon that enable the individual to construct and enact empowering behaviours. It can be argued that, historically, the sociocultural and ecological context of family-centred practice created a relationship in which the professional comes from a position as the more skilled and knowledgeable expert in the partnership, and the family as disempowered, as they lacked the medical skills and knowledge to confidently support and care for their child with complex needs at home. As such, it was the professional's role to assist the family to become empowered decision makers. In following the constructivist approach, however, if the professional has constructed a view of themselves as being undervalued in their role and lacking professional recognition, it could be argued that they do not see themselves as coming from an empowered stance.

When examining empowerment in the early childhood education and care sector in Australia, it could be argued that this may reflect the beliefs of many educators. A body of literature exists that presents a view of educators feeling disempowered due to their own perceptions of their levels of control and decision-making, and their perceived status (Short, 1994; Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999; Enderlin-Lampe, 2002; Galen, 2005; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005; Overton, 2009). Davis and Wilson (2000, p. 349) discuss the relationship between empowerment and the levels to which an individual has a sense of personal power and motivation. Empowerment in teachers has been linked to feelings of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, supportive leadership and a sense of professional status (Short, 1994; Davis & Wilson, 2000; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Zembylas and Papanastasiou (2005, p. 451) found that teachers who were satisfied with their professional growth, opportunities for decision-making and status ended up with a high sense of empowerment. Quaglia et al (1991, p. 211) also found that satisfied and dissatisfied teachers differed on their sense of empowerment, with satisfied teachers presenting with higher levels of empowerment than dissatisfied teachers. Teacher satisfaction is associated with teacher pay, working conditions, levels of stress, professional status and perceived capacity to adequately undertake their role as teachers (Short, 1994; Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005; Overton, 2009).

Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia

In the context of the early childhood education and care workforce in Australia, these discussions on teacher empowerment are particularly pertinent. Since the early part of this century, there has been considerable discussion on the dichotomy between 'education' and 'care' with young children. In Victoria, the provision of 'education' is mostly perceived as being the realm of early childhood teachers holding a three- or four-year degree, who provide programs for children in the year prior to starting school, and 'care' is seen to be the main emphasis of services sought mainly by working parents to enable them to gain paid employment. These care services are mainly provided for by staff qualified at the two-year diploma level or those with certificate-level training. A significant number of the early childhood care workforce across Australia has no formal training at all (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). This context has led to an environment where there is a professional divide between what constitutes a 'proper' teacher in early childhood education and care settings (MacFarlane & Lewis, 2004) and those who are seen predominately as caregivers. The national policy agenda is that all early childhood centres will employ a degree-qualified teacher by 2014, but many long day-care centres in Victoria are still to meet this policy agenda and are mostly staffed by lesser-qualified educators. Since the implementation of a national reform agenda for early childhood across Australia, all practitioners involved in the care and education of young children are referred to as 'early childhood educators', regardless of the qualification they hold.

This background provides an important context for framing the discussion on empowerment as it is enacted within the early childhood and care sector across Australia, particularly as it relates to those educators working in roles more traditionally associated with care provision. Since the mid 1990s, childcare in Australia has largely been shaped by policy aimed at enhancing economic prosperity by supporting women to engage in paid employment. This policy saw a significant increase in 'for-profit' services to meet increased consumer demands for childcare places. Early childhood education and care now sits within an environment where parents are often seen as consumers and purchasers of a service (Goodfellow, 2007). These policy directions have resulted in a sector that is now characterised by low levels of qualified staff, poor pay and conditions, as well as 'poorly defined and fragmented notions of customer need, and weak professional advocacy' (Bretherton, 2010, p. 7), creating a climate in which childcare practitioners feel undervalued and in which there is a largely disempowered workforce (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2011).

The Study

Using a case study methodology (Yin, 2003), six early childhood educators working in a large early childhood education and care centre in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city, participated in an individual interview lasting around an hour. The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of the relationships that the participants believed existed with the parents of the children in their care in order to examine the extent to which these relationships reflected the model of family-centred practice. The interviews were structured so as to gain insight into the educators' perceptions of the partnerships between themselves and the parents, and the extent to which the educators felt empowered to assist parents to be empowered partners.

The centre where the educators work provides programs for children aged between birth and six years, with most of the children attending either full-time or two to three days each week while their parents are working. The community where the centre is located is very diverse, with many families having English as a second language and where there are 18 different languages spoken by families across the centre. The educators working in the centre also reflect this diversity, with a number speaking the community languages of some families. Many of the educators also live in the local community. While one of the participants in the study had been at the centre for only three years, most of the educators have worked in the centre for at least five years. The educators have a range of qualification levels, ranging from certificate-level training in children's services to a two-year-diploma-level qualification. Although none of the staff had a teaching qualification, one educator was, at that time, studying to complete a Bachelor's degree.

The six participants were representative of this staff population, with three holding diploma-level qualifications and three certificate-level qualifications. Four participants spoke English as a second language. One of the diploma-qualified participants was in a position of leadership at the centre. A second diploma-qualified participant was employed as a room leader and, at the time of the study, was undertaking her Bachelor's degree studies part-time. All the participants were female and ranged in age from 22 years to 60. They had between 3 and 20 years' experience working as early childhood educators. Table I presents an outline of the individual participants, their qualifications and their role in the centre.

Participant	Qualification	Role	Parent	English as a second language	Years in sector
1	Diploma	Centre leadership	No	No	5
2	Diploma (studying for a degree)	Room leader	No	No	3
3	Diploma	Room assistant	Yes	Yes	5
4	Certificate	Room assistant	Yes	Yes	7
5	Certificate	Room assistant	Yes	Yes	9
6	Certificate	Room assistant	Yes	Yes	20

Table I. The participants' characteristics.

The Findings

The interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions entered into the NVivo program for analysis. The responses from the participants were individually coded in order to identify the key themes that emerged. These themes focused on the participants' beliefs as to the nature of the partnerships that had been created with the families, and the factors that they felt influenced the way these partnerships functioned. As empowerment is a core component of family-centred practice, the transcripts were coded in order to extrapolate references to empowerment and how this was discussed by the individual participants.

Effectiveness of Partnerships

Each participant believed they had positive relationships with most of the families of the children using the service. When asked to describe the nature of the relationships they held, typical responses were: 'I think they [referring to families] would say we have a good one. We work hard towards building a relationship with our families' (Participant 5) and 'their [the child's] family is your family, you're living in a big family. So we have a very big family here' (Participant 4). While not mentioned explicitly, these responses indicate characteristics of partnerships found in the literature, such as respect and dignity shown towards families.

Influences on the Partnership

There were a number of factors that the participants believed influenced the way these relationships had been built. Three of the educators, who were parents themselves, spoke of being a parent as a strong influence on the way they interact with parents, demonstrated through comments such as: 'Well, I'm a mother, and a nana, and live in the community' (Participant 6). Another participant responded that 'I think my personal life I think my own children' (Participant 5) was an influencing factor. A third participant commented that 'as a person I believe that I treat the children like my own children. So whatever is best for my children, I treat all the children in my care the same' (Participant 3), linking the way she cares for children to the way she cares for families.

While not being a parent herself, Participant 1 also discussed the experiences gained in her home life as influencing the way she interacts with families, discussing having to drop out of school at 16 to care for her mother and having to travel across town by public transport on weekends to gain her qualification as impacting on the way she deals with families: 'So I've had the experience

of dealing with those difficult emotional situations, which influence the way I interact with families a lot. So a lot of my home life has influenced how I interact with families'.

Participant 4 attributed her experience as a parent to influencing the way she interacted with families. She defined herself as follows: 'I'm a family, I'm a parent, I'm a mother, so when I think about it, I want them to talk to me'. She also spoke of her past experiences as a young bride of 14 and of migrating to Australia as a teenager, as well as being a parent, as providing her with confidence for the role she takes with families.

Time was also seen as a factor that influenced the nature of the relationships. Those relationships with parents that had been able to develop over a number of years, as the educators cared for the older and then younger siblings in the same family, had created positive feelings of partnership. 'I've had a lot of time to get to know the families that I do have good relationships with and they've gotten to know me' (Participant 1) and 'they were happy to see me there [in the child's room], because they know me for the three or four years I had their sons or their older daughters before' (Participant 4) are indicative of the responses of the participants.

Another key factor that appeared to influence the nature of the relationships was trust and respect. Comments such as 'there's a lot of effort that has to be put on to form a partnership, and you need the basis of any relationship, trust and respect' (Participant 1) and 'Yeah, it's the respect that you have for each other I think' (Participant 6) reflected a conscious action by these participants to build trust and respect with families. These statements were supported by later comments such as: 'I've formed those relationships now, so the main thing is to have those respectful relationships' (Participant 1) and 'We always try and gain their trust. Trust is very important' (Participant 6).

While these two educators spoke positively about the importance of respectful and trusting relationships as influencing the partnerships, this was not reflected in the interviews of all the participants. In contrast, not feeling respected was discussed as a key factor in relationships that other educators described as being less positive. A common theme coming from these interviews was a perception that some parents see the educator as 'just a babysitter' (Participant 5): 'Sometimes I feel they [parents] treat us as a babysitter' (Participant 2). Or parents think that: 'I'm paying for this so they [the children] have to be looked after' (Participant 4). Other comments further identified perceptions of being undervalued by parents – for example, 'This family, whatever I did, she didn't like me, you know. She used to wait for another staff member to come in, like she didn't trust leaving him with me' (Participant 3); 'when she comes to pick him up I was talking about the child's day and she wasn't even listening' (Participant 5); and 'I feel the parents when they walk in, it's like they're angry, or you feel like you're wasting their time, they don't want to talk to you' (Participant 2). It became apparent from the responses that engaging with the educators in discussion about their child's day is a way that these educators feel they are respected and valued by parents.

When reflecting on the relationships that they did not describe as an effective partnership, some educators outlined situations where they felt their professional expertise and knowledge of early childhood development was not being recognised, typified by a statement such as: 'because I am younger, I get a lot of "You don't know, because you're young!"' (Participant 2). Participant 1 had also discussed feeling like this when she first started her career as an untrained 18-year-old:

> When I started I actually had a lot of trouble, being that I was only just eighteen, so I did have a
> trouble with getting families to trust me and respect me in educating their children, purely for
> the fact that I was eighteen.

She, however, went on to say that: 'it didn't take me long to get over it, and once families got to know me, it was irrelevant'. It is worth noting that this participant is the same age as Participant 2 and has the same level of qualification; however, it is Participant 1 who spoke originally about the influence of her previous life experiences as impacting on how she interacts with families. Participant 2 did not bring any of this self-reflection into the discussion. Participant 5 believed that some parents do not value her expertise in providing advice on child development and she saw this as impacting on the partnerships she formed: 'she [a parent] asks for the advice … and she does it with us for a little while, and she goes back and then we're back at square one' – although this was not found to be an issue in other responses.

All of the participants identified language barriers as an issue in forming effective partnerships with families where English was not their first language. Representative responses are:

> I struggle to form relationships with them [families where English is a second language]. Because I can't talk to them I have to get one of my co-workers to translate any information. So it's hard to form a rapport with those families. (Participant 1)

> Some families are different because they can't speak the language … I treat them the same, I just have to go running around looking for someone that speaks the same language as them to interpret for me. (Participant 5)

> Sometimes when I can't communicate to the families if they're, like, non-speaking English or something like that, I find it hard to communicate to them, so it's hard to form that connection with them as well. (Participant 2)

Across the centre, however, there was mostly a sense of connection with the families for whom English is not their first language and a perception of empowering the families by presenting children's work, assessments and achievements in the families' home language – for example, 'wherever possible we try and make sure staff in their language talks to them and explains to them, and we try and give them information in their language' (Participant 6) and, 'Last year I start doing learning journeys, and the books, in Turkish and in English, and I write Turkish and on the side it's English, what she's doing in Turkish and explain and I write in English too' (Participant 4).

Power and Empowerment

When asked to reflect on their perceptions of whether they felt that there was shared power in the partnerships between themselves and the families, the participants' responses varied. With some of the participants, the responses reflected a belief that in some relationships which were perceived as less positive, the parents have more power. The following comments are indicative responses: 'a few families think they have power, they can do anything they want' (Participant 2); 'some parents, they think they've got more power, at the end of the day I think so, because it's their child' (Participant 5); '[some parents think] "I want the best for my child. If it's not, I can follow up, I can go and make them work better"' (Participant 3); and 'probably that they've got more power, because you sort of feel a little bit intimidated' (Participant 2). These comments reflect a level of disempowerment in these three educators, projecting a perception of not being respected or valued by these parents. Participant 2 also spoke about parents being angry and intimidating – 'another family, I feel the parents when they walk in, it's like they're angry, or you feel like you're wasting their time' – and projected a lack of confidence in knowing how to build relationships with these families.

However, not all the responses reflected these levels of disempowerment. Two of the participants, when asked the same questions, responded differently. Participant 1 believed that in the past, when she was younger and had just started working with children, she had felt disempowered in her relationships with some families:

> I did have a trouble with getting families to trust me and respect me in educating their children, purely for the fact that I was eighteen. And it didn't make a difference that I could do what I was doing and was doing well.

However, now that she has worked to establish herself in her role, she speaks with more confidence: 'now, a lot's changed, I've formed those relationships now, so the main thing is to have those respectful relationships'. She spoke with pride of the way that, in just a few short years, she had built her own professional capacity from being an untrained room assistant five years ago to now being a member of the leadership team: 'It hasn't taken me long to go from co-worker down in the toddlers' room, to now I'm acting 2IC [assistant manager]'.

Participant 6 reflected that some parents may have different expectations and understanding of the childcare program, needing time to gain a shared understanding: 'it's a constant trying to persuade parents that children need to get dirty, need to get wet, need to play with sensory things. Some cultures don't understand the importance of play'. This participant saw it as her role to work

with parents 'to get their confidence'. This same educator was able to communicate a sense of empathy towards families that previous participants had not demonstrated: 'I sometimes think they find it hard to leave their children, it's not really a personal thing, it's just getting that trust and feeling like they can leave their children every day, go to work' and 'Oh, now I know how difficult it is when nana comes in and there's a few tears because the grandchild's crying'. Throughout the interview, she not only spoke confidently about herself as an educator, but also presented as someone who had a strong understanding of the emotions that parents may be experiencing when leaving their child in care. While other participants spoke of being a parent as influencing how they related to families, it was only this participant who spoke about understanding the emotions parents were experiencing. She also perceived her own experiences living in the community as supporting her to build an understanding of how families may be feeling when leaving their children in care:

> Well, I'm a mother, and a nana, and live in the community ... so when I work here I feel like I'm part of this community ... I feel all that experience has been invaluable and now in the toddlers' room ... we get a lot of broad spectrum of the community come here, which makes it very interesting to work. I love it.

Discussion

Family-centred practice presents a model of partnership in which relationships are based on mutual trust and respect, but also where more expert professionals assist families to be empowered and respected decision makers. Being empowered has been described as having the attitudes, knowledge and behaviours associated with perceptions of control, competence and confidence (Thompson et al, 1997; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007). While family-centred practice centres on professionals assisting parents to become empowered, partnerships are mutual relationships, suggesting that educators also need to be empowered partners in the relationship. The findings from this study suggest that while some of the educators present with characteristics where they might be described as being empowered, others do not seem to possess the same perceptions of control and confidence in their relationships with some families.

Three of the participants (Participants 2, 3 and 5) spoke of families with whom they had found it difficult to form a positive relationship, and expressed feeling disempowerment in these relationships. The findings showed a perception by these educators that some families did not seem to have a professional recognition of their role as an educator, presenting a belief that some parents treat them as a babysitter and describing feeling intimidated when they try and engage with them, reinforcing the links between a sense of professional identity and professional status and levels of empowerment found in the literature (Short, 1994; Davis & Wilson, 2000; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005), as these participants clearly perceived themselves as having low professional status and presented with lower levels of self-efficacy.

However, other participants responded in a much more reflective and empathetic way. Three of the educators (Participants 1, 4 and 6) discussed the need for families to have time to develop a shared partnership and to feel confident in trusting their child to the care of the educators. They were able to reflect an understanding of the parent perspective that had not been evident in the responses for the previous educators. The responses by these educators reflected relationships with families in which they presented as being empowered as equal and respected decision makers, in turn supporting families as empowered partners in the relationship. None of these participants expressed the feelings of disempowerment that had been evident with the previous group. Each of these participants had discussed past life experiences as being a strong influence on the development of their own personal capacity, which they saw as a key factor in the way they formed relationships with families. This was something that the previous group had not reflected on during their interviews.

Policy and societal context has placed the image of the early childhood educator in Australia as lacking in professional identity and status (Goodfellow, 2007; Bretherton, 2010; Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2011); however, in examining the differing perceptions of empowerment presented by the educators, merely drawing the connection to professional status and recognition does not in itself provide the reasons for feeling disempowered. All the participants

belong to the same professional industry and work in the same service. While they held differing levels of qualifications and experience, this did not seem to be a factor in the comments they presented in the interviews. Only one of the participants who presented as empowered held a diploma-level qualification, while the other two were certificate-level assistants. On the other hand, of those presenting as less empowered, two were qualified to diploma level, one of whom spoke of feeling intimidated by some of the families.

It is necessary to look further into why some of the participants reflected greater levels of empowerment than their colleagues. As discussed in the literature review, a constructivist view presents individual levels of empowerment as being determined by the sociocultural and ecological context in which the individual exists, and the experiences drawn upon to enable the individual to construct and enact empowering behaviours (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995; Foster-Fishman et al, 1998). The three participants who presented as being more empowered in their relationships and partnership with families were able to present a view of themselves as having a strong sense of self-efficacy. These individuals were able to reflect on and acknowledge their personal sociocultural and ecological context as influencing the way they create and respond to partnerships with families. Individually, they reflected on life experiences and challenges as influencing the person they are today, and how their life experiences have enabled them to build their personal self-efficacy, which in Zimmerman's (1990) view is a necessary component of empowerment. It was this personal and intuitive reflection of the influence of past experiences that was not evident in the interviews with the other participants. It appears that it is the level of self-efficacy rather than a societal view of professional identity and status which is of greater influence in building empowerment in the educators.

Conclusion

This study, while only focusing on a small cohort of early childhood educators working in one long day-care centre in Melbourne, does present some interesting findings that are of significance when examining the capacity of the sector to empower families as partners in the care and education of their children. While empowerment is a central component of family-centred practice, not all early childhood educators are equally positioned to empower families or, in fact, even demonstrate empowerment in some of the relationships they have with the families of children in their care.

While links have been made in the literature between empowerment and professional identity, it could be assumed that, given the context of the Australian early childhood workforce, the profession as a group – particularly those who are mainly involved in the care of young children – would be largely disempowered. However, the findings from this small-scale study present a different view. While all the participants interviewed held similar qualifications and levels of experience and worked in the same centre, three of the participants were able to demonstrate higher levels of empowerment than their colleagues. These participants were all able to draw on past experiences as shaping the way they engaged with parents.

The findings support the constructivist view of empowerment as being influenced by the sociocultural and ecological experiences of the individual. Those educators who were able to reflect on the influence of life experiences were able to demonstrate higher levels of empowerment than those who perceived they were disempowered as a result of the behaviour and attitudes of some families. This constructivist view is important when building the professional capacity of the early childhood workforce to engage in effective and empowering partnerships with families. It is being in empowering environments, where educators are supported to build self-efficacy and to reflect on themselves and their identity, which is critical in building an empowered profession that, in turn, can support the empowerment of parents as equal partners in the decision-making for their children.

References

Alasuutari, M. (2010) Striving at Partnership: parent–practitioner relationships in Finnish early educators' talk, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 18(2), 149-161. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13502931003784545

Allen, R.I. & Petr, C.G. (1998) Rethinking Family-Centered Practice, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 68(1), 4-15. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0080265

Ashton, J., Woodrow, C., Johnston, C., Wangmann, J., Singh, L. & James, T. (2008) Partnerships in Learning: linking early childhood services, families and schools for optimal development, *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33(2), 10-16.

Australian Government Productivity Commission (2011) *Early Childhood Development Workforce: Productivity Commission research report*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Birenbaum-Carmeli, D. (1999) Parents Who Get What They Want: on the empowerment of the powerful, *Sociological Review*, 47(1), 62-90. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.00163

Blue-Banning, M., Summers, J.A., Frankland, H.C., Nelson, L.L. & Beegle, G. (2004) Dimensions of Family and Professional Partnerships: constructive guidelines for collaboration, *Exceptional Children*, 70(2), 167-184.

Boehm, A. & Staples, L. (2004) Empowerment: the point of view of consumers, *Families in Society*, 85(2), 270-280.

Bretherton, T. (2010) *Developing the Child Care Workforce: understanding 'fight' or 'flight' amongst workers*. Sydney: Workplace Research Centre, University of Sydney.

Brewer, E.J., McPherson, M., Magrab, P.R. & Hutchins, V.L. (1989) Family-Centered, Community-Based Coordinated Care for Children with Special Health Care Needs, *Pediatrics*, 83(6), 1055-1060.

Brown, W., Thurman, S.K. & Pearl, L.F. (Eds) (1993) *Family-Centered Early Intervention with Infants and Toddlers: innovative cross-disciplinary approaches*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Craft-Rosenberg, M., Kelley, P. & Schnoll, L. (2006) Family-Centered Care: practice and preparation, *Families in Society*, 87(1), 17-25.

Davis, H., Day, C. & Bidmead, C. (2002) *Working in Partnership with Parents: the parent adviser model*. London: Harcourt Assessment.

Davis, J. & Wilson, S.M. (2000) Principals' Efforts to Empower Teachers: effects on teacher motivation and job satisfaction and stress, *Clearing House*, 73(6), 349-353. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00098650009599442

Dempsey, I. & Foreman, P. (1997) Toward a Clarification of Empowerment as an Outcome of Disability Service Provision, *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 44(4), 287-303. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0156655970440402

Dempsey, I. & Keen, D. (2008) A Review of Processes and Outcomes in Family-Centered Services for Children with a Disability, *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 28(1), 42-52. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0271121408316699

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2009) *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework for All Children from Birth to Eight Years*. Carlton: Victorian Government Publications.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2009) *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the early years learning framework for Australia*. Canberra: Commonwealth Government of Australia.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2010) *State of Child Care in Australia*. Canberra: Commonwealth Government of Australia.

Duncan, R. (2007) Building Connections, *Education Horizon*, 9(6), 24-25.

Dunlap, G. & Fox, L. (2007) Parent–Professional Partnerships: a valuable context for addressing challenging behaviours, *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 54(3), 273-28http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10349120701488723

Dunst, C.J. (2002) Family-Centered Practices: birth through high school, *Journal of Special Education*, 36(3), 139-147. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00224669020360030401

Dunst, C.J. (2010) Family-Centred Practice. Paper presented at Centre for Community Child Health Program of Events, Melbourne, April.

Dunst, C.J. & Dempsey, I. (2007) Family–Professional Partnerships and Parenting Competence, Confidence, and Enjoyment, *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 54(3), 305-318. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10349120701488772

Dunst, C.J. & Trivette, C.M. (1996) Empowerment, Effective Helpgiving Practices and Family-Centered Care, *Pediatric Nursing*, 22(4), 334-338.

Dunst, C.J., Trivette, C.M. & Deal, A. (1988) *Enabling and Empowering Families: principles and guidelines for practice*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

Enderlin-Lampe, S. (2002) Empowerment: teacher perceptions, aspirations and efficacy, *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 29(3), 139-146.

Epstein, J. (2001) *School, Family and Community Partnerships: preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Fitzgerald, D. (2004) *Parent Partnership in the Early Years*. London: Continuum.

Foster-Fishman, P.G., Salem, D.A., Chibnall, S., Legler, R. & Yapchai, C. (1998) Empirical Support for the Critical Assumptions of Empowerment Theory, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(4), 507-536. http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1022188805083

Galen, H. (2005) Restoring Teacher Empowerment: a possible antidote for current educational challenges, *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 71(3), 31-36.

Goodfellow, J. (2007) Childcare Provision: whose responsibility? Who Pays? In E. Hill, B. Pocock & A. Elliot (Eds) *Kids Count: better quality early childhood education and care in Australia*, pp. 245-271. Sydney: Sydney University Press.

Jinnah, H.A. & Walters, L.H. (2008) Including Parents in Evaluation of a Child Development Program: relevance of parental involvement, *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 10(1). http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v10n1/jinnah.html

Johnson, B.H. (2000) Family-Centered Care: four decades of progress, *Families, Systems and Health*, 18(2), 137-157. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0091843

Keen, D. (2007) Parents, Families, and Partnerships: issues and considerations, *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 54(3), 339-349. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10349120701488855

Knopf, H. & Swick, K. (2006) How Parents Feel about Their Child's Teacher/School: implications for early childhood professionals, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 34(4), 291-296. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10643-006-0119-6

MacFarlane, K. & Lewis, T. (2004) Childcare – Human Services or Education: a genealogical approach, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 5(1), 51-67. http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2004.5.1.9

Madsen, W.C. (2009) Collaborative Helping: a practice framework for family-centered services, *Family Process*, 48(1), 103-116. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2009.01270.x

Nachshen, J.S. (2004) Empowerment and Families: building bridges between parents and professionals, theory and research, *Journal on Developmental Disabilities*, 11(1), 67-75.

Overton, J. (2009) Early Childhood Teachers in Contexts of Power: empowerment and a voice, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 34(2), 1-10.

Pearson, L.C. & Moomaw, W. (2005) The Relationship between Teacher Autonomy and Stress, Work Satisfaction, Empowerment, and Professionalism, *Educational Research Quarterly*, 29(1), 38-54.

Perkins, D. & Zimmerman, M. (1995) Empowerment Theory, Research, and Application, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 569-579. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF02506982

Quaglia, R., Marion, S.F. & McIntire, W.G. (1991) The Relationship of Teacher Satisfaction to Perceptions of School Organization, Teacher Empowerment, Work Conditions, and Community Status, *Education*, 112(2), 206-216.

Raghavendra, P., Murchland, S., Bentley, M., Wake-Dyster, W. & Lyons, T. (2007) Parents' and Service Providers' Perceptions of Family-Centred Practice in a Community-based, Paediatric Disability Service in Australia, *Child*, 33(5), 586-592.

Rappaport, J. (1981) In Praise of Paradox: a social policy of empowerment over prevention, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 9(1), 1-25. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00896357

Rappaport, J. (1987) Terms of Empowerment/Exemplars of Prevention: toward a theory of community psychology, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 15(2), 121-148. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00919275

Ratcliff, N. & Hunt, G. (2009) Building Teacher–Family Partnerships: the role of teacher preparation programs, *Education*, 129(3), 495-505.

Short, P.M. (1994) Defining Teacher Empowerment, *Education*, 114(4), 488-492.

Singh, N.N. (1995) In Search of Unity: some thoughts on family–professional relationships in service delivery systems, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 4(1), 3-18. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF02233951

Tayler, C. (2006) Challenging Partnerships in Australian Early Childhood Education, *Early Years*, 26(3), 249-265. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09575140600898423

Thompson, L., Lobb, C., Elling, R., Herman, S., Jurkiewicz, T. & Hulleza, C. (1997) Pathways to Family Empowerment: effects of family-centered delivery of early intervention services, *Exceptional Children*, 64(1), 99-113.

Turnbull, A.P. & Turnbull, H.R. (2001) *Families, Professionals and Exceptionality: collaborating for empowerment*, 4th edn. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Yin, R.K. (2003) *Case Study Research: design and methods*, 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zembylas, M. & Papanastasiou, E.C. (2005) Modeling Teacher Empowerment: the role of job satisfaction, *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 11(5), 433-459. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13803610500146152

Zimmerman, M.A. (1990) Taking Aim on Empowerment Research: on the distinction between individual and psychological conceptions, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 18(1), 169-177. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00922695

Zimmerman, M.A. (1995) Psychological Empowerment: issues and illustrations, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 581-599. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF02506983

Zimmerman, M.A. & Rappaport, J. (1988) Citizen Participation, Perceived Control and Psychological Empowerment, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 16(5), 725-750. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00930023

ELIZABETH ROUSE is a Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. She has worked extensively in the area of building professional practice with early childhood educators and has a strong interest in family-centred practice. *Correspondence*: rouse.ej@gmail.com