

## **RURAL PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND VALUES AND HOW THEY MAY CONTRIBUTE TO A MORE CONTEXTUALLY BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM.**

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### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

The preservice training of early childhood professionals prepares teachers to work with young children, but rarely does it incorporate aspects of rural education nor is it specifically designed to prepare graduates for work in rural communities (Higgins, 1993; Bloodsworth, 1994; Kirk, 1994). Many of the initial employment opportunities available to graduates exist in rural areas. How well prepared are these generically trained teachers to undertake work in rural early childhood services? Are there aspects to rural communities that differ from urban contexts? This study investigates the perceptions and values of parents accessing a rural early childhood service. It attempts to illuminate what values are held by parents that could impact on how programs are developed, what expectations they have for their child in this service and in education generally. It would seem that there are distinctive and consistent values that could influence program design and delivery as well as implications for tertiary institutions in the way they train preservice teachers for work in rural communities.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is considerable literature which investigates the areas of rural education and quite separately, although to a lesser degree, parent perceptions of early childhood services. This study proposes to combine these areas with the aim of providing a more informed understanding of the rural context from the perceptions of parents accessing an early childhood service. Such increased understanding will perhaps provide improved links with the community and the possibility of informing program development in the early childhood setting so that it more accurately reflects the values of the rural context of which it is part.

Literature relating to the intersection of the rural context and early childhood education is limited (Winer; 1981; Incerti; 1990; Clyde; 1991; Kirk, 1994; Atkinson, 1996). When one seeks to add parents' perceptions to this equation the success rate is lowered further (Atkinson; 1996). In order to provide a background review for this proposal, the apparently diverse areas of rural education, early childhood education and parent perceptions will be consulted.

### **THE CONTEXTUAL NATURE OF LEARNING**

Appreciation of the contextual nature of learning is supported by the work of Lambert (1995). Her work in relation to young children and their cognitive development focuses attention on the significance of the learning context. Clyde, in her review of Lambert's discussion, proposes that teachers must, "... take account of the need for each child to operate in their own context, using their experiences, ways of learning and interests" (p 113, 1995). The contribution of a child's culture to their learning "context" is considered by Lambert. Perhaps this can be refined beyond the traditional international considerations of culture, to include "cultural" variations within the Australian context such as the differences between the rural and urban environments.

## THE RURAL CONTEXT

Numerous authors ascribe quite distinctive characteristics to the rural environment in contrast to that of urban areas (McFaul, 1989; Clyde, 1991; Miller, 1991; Sher, 1991; Higgins, 1993; Bloodsworth & Fitzgerald, 1994; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Elder, King & Conger, 1996). Higgins (1993) identifies a strong sense of community as a distinctive characteristic of the rural context. Eller (1991), proposes the importance of a rural community working together, both out of necessity and custom. He defines a "sense of place" that connects individuals to others allowing them to appreciate the relationship between the individual and the common good. McFaul, in his personal account of rural life and values, identifies a perspective of time which "...involves continuity and a sense of fruition"(1989; p4). Elder and King highlight rural values including a decreased orientation towards materialistic objectives and children possessing a stronger awareness of their social significance.

The 1995 study by Herzog et al, identified an awareness and valuing of such things as, aesthetics, safety, and peace in rural communities. Perhaps Sher summarises it best when he suggests that rural areas have, unique cultural and physical conditions (1991).

## FORGING LINKS WITH THE COMMUNITY

An appreciation of the rural context as culturally distinctive from the urban environment and the significance of this to the early childhood field, begs to be linked. Atkinson's 1996 paper has made this association, with a focus on rural mothers' evaluations of caregiver styles and types in both rural and urban areas in the United States. A number of authors attest to the importance of forging links with the rural community and others to directly accessing parent perceptions to enhance contextual awareness (Clyde, 1991; Miller, 1991; Higgins, 1994; Flising, 1995; Gareau & Sawatzky, 1995). Clyde (1991), reports on a 1988 study which incorporated a review of parent perceptions of early childhood services in the Mallee region of Victoria. This study focussed mainly on the parents' perceptions of service availability and alternative delivery models. Although it did not focus specifically on parent perceptions of rural values, Clyde recommends that credence be given to, "... parent's needs, parent expectations and parent perceptions of a worthwhile service" (p 20, 1991). This notion is supported by Miller who suggests that there is a conspicuous absence of schools as collaborative partners with their rural communities (1991). Thus it would seem that there is a need to address the parental perceptions of rural families with consideration to how these values contribute to the provision of contextual learning for young children.

The parent/ teacher relationship has been problematic on occasions. Flising (1995), reports on her study which dealt with relations between parents and the preschool. She suggests that while early childhood staff frequently lament the lack of suggestions from parents about what is to be learned or done in preschool, there is a strong element of what are "appropriate suggestions"(1995). Is a parent who suggests ideas not in accordance with the tradition of the service viewed as troublesome? The study by Gareau and Sawatzky (1995) was aimed at, understanding how educators and parents define collaboration, and viewed this as essential in gaining understandings that may help overcome the deterioration of parent/school relationships of late. Gareau and Sawatzky reflect that historically in rural areas, parents and teachers had everyday contact and there was a sense of community and cultural uniformity. To facilitate and enhance this relationship in the 1990s, perhaps teachers need to relinquish some of their professional/expert status which maintains collaboration at a superficial level (Gareau & Sawatzky, 1995). While the parent/teacher relationship is not without its hurdles, it would seem that teachers may need to more actively work towards facilitating its establishment.

## **THE RESEARCH STUDY**

This study was conducted in a small rural community in the north eastern region of Victoria. The town involved is isolated from other Victorian service centres by considerable distances and is significantly larger than any of the small NSW towns that are closer. The geographic nature of this community means that early childhood services are limited and also accessed by families at a considerable distance to the town.

The participants in the study were families who access an early childhood service catering for children three years of age. Being the year prior to their funded preschool year, means that this service is entirely user pays. This study examined the perceptions and expectations of these parents in relation to education, community and rural life with the intention that this information could contribute to a more contextually based early childhood three year old service.

Six parents were approached to participate in the semi structured interviews. They were drawn from the total enrolled population that had been categorised into three groups by stratified sampling. The first category were two parents who travelled in excess of thirty kilometres to access the service. The second group were two parents whose main income is derived from agricultural endeavours. The final group involve two parents who reside in town and whose main income source is from non agricultural endeavours. Those interviewed consisted of five females and one male. The background of participants emerged during the interviews and it was evident that one participant had grown up in the city and chosen to move to a rural area as an adult. Another had spent most of her childhood and early adolescence in the city and moved to a rural community as a teenager. The remaining participants were raised in rural communities and had all experienced life in an urban setting at some time.

As the interviewer, I had some background knowledge of these families as a result of their enrolment details and also incidental encounters within the community context. The questions for the interviews were derived as a result of reviewing the literature in the areas of rural education, parents' perceptions and contextually based early childhood programs.

The questionnaires were developed based on the coded themes that emerged from the interviews. Respondents were asked to address a number of questions with a strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree or not applicable response alternative (Likert scale). In addition there were five questions that required a more detailed written response. Twenty questionnaires were distributed and fourteen were returned (a 70% response rate).

## **THE FINDINGS**

### **The Rural Environment**

The response of interview participants to questions related to life in a rural environment referred to the friendliness of the people as a positive aspect. One respondent suggested that due to the isolation from her own family " ...people (here) have taken on the roles of my family network". Another referred to making friends with everyone and wanting to get along with others, stating that "It is an extended family". One participant suggested that there is some degree of difficulty for newcomers to be able to easily access the social scene, particularly in the case of adolescents. For an adult entering the community this is frequently addressed by established adults in the community who make an effort to introduce themselves to newcomers. One respondent said that this would not be the case in the city where people tend to keep to themselves. While participants referred to this friendliness and everyone knowing each other, they were all quick to balance this with comments relating to the disadvantages this has( such as people knowing your business).

Questionnaire responses reiterated these findings with a one hundred percent response to the statement that having time for others was important. This could be directly related to the value placed on the importance of social opportunities for their children. Ninety three percent of respondents claimed that this was significant. Again there was a one hundred percent response rate to the issue of getting along with others and cooperating.

The value placed by parents on such social aspects is therefore consistent with how highly they value social opportunities for their children.

Half of those interviewed associated this friendliness with a sense of safety. Being acquainted with many people tended to provide a feeling of security: "If the kids wander off or something...nine times out of ten someone's going to know that it's Rachel's child". This theme was confirmed by the questionnaire responses. Ninety three percent of respondents agreed that there was a sense of safety in the country and that this was important when raising children. One respondent gave an example of an experience she had had trying to help a drunk lady in a toilet when visiting a regional centre. She described how this experience had impacted on her children and influenced them to be more scared and reluctant in urban places. This sense of security is tempered by one respondent who appreciated that "...it's only as safe as you make it". Children were seen to be friendly as a result of this security and thus able and confident to interact with adults and others.

The interview respondents raised the issue of people in the country being less materialistic than those in urban areas. This aspect of rural life was not confirmed by the questionnaire responses. Fifty seven percent felt that this was not the case and thus the group was divided on this issue.

The interview participants further illustrated a variety of positive aspects to rural life. There were comments relating to the aesthetic nature of the environment, the open spaces, and the absence of hustle and bustle. These points were confirmed by the written response made by the questionnaire respondents. Lack of pollution was frequently cited as a positive environmental aspect as well as the increased sporting opportunities and less exposure to drugs as all contributing to a healthier life style. "[s]afer, more relaxed life style", "...beautiful country air", and "greater appreciation of nature and our surroundings" were all cited as relevant.

### **The Role of the Community**

Being active in the community was raised by those interviewed and strongly supported by the questionnaire responses. One hundred percent responded that they viewed this as important. As one participant said, there is "[m]ore a sense of belonging to a community". Interview respondents gave examples of experiences that they had had when people in the community had helped them out when they needed a hand. In some cases these people were not even known to the people receiving help. For teachers in a rural community it is the view of ninety three percent of questionnaire respondents that they should be involved in community activity also.

### **How Education is Perceived**

The interviews raised a number of issues in relation to education. One participant with a teaching background reported that schools in rural areas are more relaxed but that it is difficult to get many children to work harder. This participant continued saying that the smaller size of schools and classes in rural settings are perceived by parents as important in the early childhood, primary and lower high years, but as a disadvantage later in senior high. She felt that a number of parents come to view a lack of competition evident in rural schools as a disadvantage in the later years of schooling.

There was evidence in the written responses to the questionnaire that suggested there are limited options for children in educational choices while at school and also in career options available to

them later. Most notably the perceived disadvantages of rural life centred around the lack of cultural opportunities. Limited options for musical instruction, visits to the zoo, museum and theatres were frequent comments, although no direct link was made to the school system as being responsible for rectifying this perceived disadvantage.

### **Early Childhood Education in Particular**

In relation to early childhood education in particular, the interviews suggested that opportunities for social interaction with peers was valued highly. This was reiterated by the questionnaire responses that included "... an ability to participate in group activities with children of their own age", "*Learning to socialise properly with other three year olds*" and the following reflective comment:

*"One can prepare one's child at home in terms of pre reading, pre writing and preschool activities for the years ahead...but socialising in a group and learning to communicate with adults other than one's immediate family and friends is essential and can only be learned through experience".*

These social skills were viewed as important by parents since they would help prepare the child for school, make them a better person, and help them develop socially acceptable behaviour.

The respondents included reference to other factors such as the need for children to gain independence from them, beginning learning, "...making them ready for kinder", and "...developing confidence in her own abilities", as relevant outcomes of the three year old group. The isolated nature of the home environments, particularly of children who live thirty kilometres out of town was noted as a significant reason for attending the three year old group. This was supported also by the farming father involved, who felt that his child needed the chance to "*be a bit more gregarious*" since he was frequently in the company of adults.

### **Areas of Interest for Rural Teachers**

The responses to the issue of rural children's needs being different to those of urban children was divided. Fifty seven percent agreed with this assertion with one omitting to respond resulting in the negative figure being thirty six percent. More notably perhaps was the response to the issue of teacher training for the rural environment. Ninety three percent of responses indicated that teacher training should prepare future teachers for the aspects of rural life that are different to life in the city. The one alternative response suggested that children want to know what goes on in the city and may be thus suggesting that teachers with city experience can provide such information.

Preparing children for life in the city was suggested as important by interview participants. This assertion was reinforced in both pragmatic terms and more philosophically by questionnaire respondents. Eighty six percent of responses supported the idea of the education system preparing children for city life by giving them opportunities to negotiate public transport and other practical skills. One hundred percent of responses agreed with the notion that to prepare children for city life, education should foster independence, broad-mindedness, and motivation. Eighty six percent of respondents agreed with the notion that an early childhood teacher's awareness of the hopes and expectations of the parents will enable early childhood services to work better.

### **Review of the Findings**

This research suggests that the perceptions and values of rural families are quite consistent given the specificity of the context they are in. The parents involved in this study have illustrated that

the rural community has distinctive participatory expectations regards its community members. Adults are expected to support each other in times of crises and to "know" most people in the community. This sense of knowing each other helps to create a climate of security, which may be only perceived but does impact on the children. The sense of comfort and familiarity that children feel in this environment is highly valued by parents.

Parents attest to the interaction that takes place in a community due to limited social diversity and limited population. One participant said that she interacted with people who were different to herself and who were from other economic groups: "you do get mixed up together". There is a need to get along with people whom you may not like or with whom you have had a negative past experience. This is often unavoidable and may not need to occur in the city due to the anonymity afforded individuals there. These social demands could relate to the overwhelming desire by parents for their children to develop social skills. While this is not only a feature of rural early childhood services, it was also evident in the research work reported on by Margaret Clyde. This work was undertaken by students and staff from the IECD (1987) and the school of Early Childhood (1989). The 1987 work, though limited, in size, may have at least indicative value here. These social aspects, while acknowledged by early childhood workers can be downplayed due to the perceived importance of other skills, particularly where there is pressure to include structured, product orientated activities for individuals. Perhaps the early childhood field, particularly in the rural context, needs to review the significance of this in the development of contextually based programs.

The study also illuminates a variety of values and perceptions that rural parents in this context see as significant. The sense of community with its demands and advantages is relevant. For early childhood teachers this belies current political and social trends towards emphasising the role of the individual (Marginson, 1992). While the social and political trends are quite recognisable, the early childhood field has also moved along this path. The significance placed on the awareness of individual needs could be perceived as an abdication of the values expressed in this study. Parents in this case (and in the work reported on by Clyde), indicate a strong desire for social interaction for their children. Parents acknowledged that there was a lack of peer interaction in the home (1991). Has the pendulum swung too far in the direction of the individual when in fact some communities see one's involvement in the community as an important responsibility?

The cross cultural study by Carlson and Stenmalm-Sjoblom, does indicate that societal differences impact on the philosophies and practices of early childhood programs (1989). Their discussion of the differences between social expectations in the United States and Sweden indicate that the Swedish concern for the group as well as the individual is evident in the way children use materials and engage in learning experiences (1989). In contrast to a degree is the US experience which tends to focus on assessment of individual needs and interests. Perhaps even the power of this individualist discourse in the early childhood field is contributing to its dominance over the concept of the group.

It is evident that rural parents perceive a need to prepare their children for the inevitable encounter with city life. The education system appears to have some role to play in the provision of this "readiness". The responses of parents to the pragmatic options of negotiating travel arrangements may prove hard to cater for (although a number of local schools do take their older primary school children on a trip to Melbourne to expose them to such challenges). Could the more abstract qualities of broad mindedness, independence and motivation could be addressed by educational institutions? How well have early childhood services promoted these qualities? What avenues are available to early childhood curriculum planners to incorporate such objectives into their specific programs?

Certainly the parents involved in this study are a limited group, in a contextually specific area. How well these findings can be or should be generalised to the wider early childhood field is debatable. If each program is to be contextually relevant then perhaps the relevance of this study is its example of a specific study for a specific context. Miller suggests that there is a conspicuous absence of collaboration between schools and communities (1991). Should more services actively canvass the opinions and perceptions of the clients/parents they cater for? Certainly the findings here indicate that parents believe that early childhood services would function better if they were aware of the hopes and expectations of the parents involved. This is supported by Miller who suggests that "Discontent arises when rural residents perceive that decisions concerning their educational needs are made in urban areas with little consultation with rural stake holders" (1994, p 10). This suggests that services should more actively canvass the opinions of parents they cater for particularly in an climate where urban decisions are viewed as directly applicable to rural environments. Atkinson asserts that while early childhood professional may not always agree with parental appraisals of quality child care, to effectively work with parents they do need to be aware of parents perceptions (1996). The applicability of the issues raised in this current study, to other rural contexts, is to some degree relevant.

### **Implications for the Early Childhood Field**

In the current climate of rationalism and accountability early childhood services need to be more aware of their clientele than ever before. The assumption can no longer be made that the teachers should determine the program based on child development, individual needs and other catch phrases. Account needs to be taken of the needs, values and perceptions of parents accessing the service and these need to be actively canvassed by those designing programs for children. Early childhood educators are well placed to elicit these needs as they have frequent contact and have established some level of relationship with parents. The next step is to engage in a more collaborative relationship with parents. As Flising points out this is often seen as desirable by staff as long as it falls within the tradition of the service, in essence not challenging that which is established (1995). Flising also identifies the diversity of parents and the differing levels of input parents wish to have. With consideration of these factors, early childhood teachers could employ a variety of formal procedures such as questionnaires and evaluations to ascertain parent perception. Informally they could engage in meaningful conversations with parents as well as involvement in community activities. These activities will illuminate the parent perceptions and could also afford the teacher an increased awareness of the child's prior knowledge and experience.

In this particular case the significance of social opportunities and the desire to promote cooperative and sharing behaviours could be facilitated by increased attention to such areas of the program. These areas could also be made more explicit to the children as Carlson and Stenmalm-Sjoblom suggest is the case in Swedish early childhood services (1989).

In relation to the preservice training of early childhood teachers these findings suggest that institutions involved in teacher training should address the differences that graduates may encounter in rural contexts (Miller, 1994). The nature of the rural context is not the same as that of the urban area and generically trained teachers will not necessarily be well prepared for the demands of teaching in this environment (Higgins, 1993, Bloodsworth, 1994, Kirk, 1994, Herzog & Pittman, 1995). McFaul suggests that the inexperienced rural teacher be provided with a package containing, research findings, useful local information, an understanding of rural values and some workable strategies (1989). Previous research undertaken by Herzog and Pittman (1995) indicates that minimal account is being taken of the rural context in teacher training and that institutions should provide more than a "superficial sensitivity training". They propose that institutions provide an examination of how prejudices are developed against rural people and rural places (1995,p3). Clyde cites the 1991 ATEA report to the NBEET working party on rural education and training, which suggests three areas institutions should address. In

addition to preparing students for work in rural areas, they suggest that practicums should be scheduled in rural areas and that inservicing rural teachers be given priority. It would thus seem apparent that aspects of rural life, educational expectation and parents' values deserve more active consideration in the preservice and inservice training of early childhood teachers.

Interestingly, to go full circle, Bloodsworth and Fitzgerald's study, examines the needs and learning styles of tertiary rural students and suggests that they have specific learning strengths and needs (1994). These students tend to view learning as a social experience, have an aversion to individual recognition and prefer to have information transmitted orally in a social setting. These findings coincide with rural parent perceptions of social opportunities and the value of sharing and cooperation for their preschool children as evidenced in this study. It would seem that these values could be transmitted to rural children to the extent of influencing their adult learning style which may at times conflict with traditional tertiary methods of pedagogy (Bloodsworth and Fitzgerald, 1994). Further investigation could be undertaken to determine if students with a rural background are more well prepared to work in rural communities given their greater contextual awareness. Perhaps tertiary institutions need to research the rural students they are teaching to gain insights into how to prepare future teachers more adequately for rural contexts.

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