

Level Three: The adults' environment as it influences their capacity to care and educate

Introduction

At this level of analysis, our key focus was on the teachers' work as they experienced it on a daily basis.

To start unpacking this experience, in the first cluster meeting we asked teachers about what they enjoyed most about their work with two year-olds and what they found difficult or frustrating. We followed up on this in our second cluster group meeting when we asked teachers to reflect on what contributed to a good or bad session with two year-olds, and what changes they had made, or wished to make, when working with two year-olds. In the third cluster group, we encouraged teachers to reflect on their own working conditions and employment experiences, which while intertwined with the children's experiences, had both similarities and differences with our earlier discussions.

Working with two year-olds

The following sections outline the joys and the frustrations of the teachers' lived experience of working with two year-olds in kindergartens. Factors which teachers felt contributed to making a session good or bad are also included in this outline. We conclude that teachers experienced their daily work as a mixture of joys and frustrations and that ambivalence existed about this mixture.

The joys

The rapidity of growth observed

While the early childhood years are always a time of rapid growth, the teachers were amazed at how quickly the two year-olds changed from being the 'baby' in the place to the older established kindergarten child, often within days. The teachers spoke at length about the joy of watching the children very quickly learn the routines and become part of the programme. They discussed how the children demonstrated independence in the routines within a very short time and that they

‘worked out the code’ very quickly. While four years-olds who are introduced to the programme for the first time also demonstrated these changes as they ‘fit’ into the programme, the overall growth, development and change of the two year-olds was a wonderful experience for the teachers to be part of, and differed in intensity and scope from that experienced with the older children.

It is really nice to be part of their life for that long

Historically, it was not unusual for children to attend kindergarten for only a year or less before going to school. Several teachers in Dunedin mentioned the benefits of being with children from their second birthday until they went to school (that is, a three-year period). In comparison to programmes that had only older children, and thus a shorter timeframe within which teachers worked with them, the teachers all talked enthusiastically about the pleasure of watching the growth, development and change of children over a longer period of time. Additionally, they noted that deeper relationships with both the child and the child’s family were possible when children started kindergarten at a younger age. One teacher described how fortunate she felt to have this length of time with the children in comparison to a “primary teacher who only has the children for a year”.

Seeing them achieve something: “I told you I could do it!”

The teachers agreed that two year-olds share a “sense of wonder”, a “joy of life and newness of everything”, which contrasted with older children who sometimes had a “blasé attitude”, or who are trying to be “cool”. Interestingly, this was a particular comment from the teachers where the children had been attending for a considerable length of time! This joy which the two year-old child shared with the teachers was regularly discussed as one of the best aspects of having two year-olds in the programme. For example, the teachers were aware that the physical closeness of the young child was often an indication of their desire to share their excitement and interest in the kindergarten with the teacher:

Teacher: They do tend to follow you too, don’t they! There are those that follow you around.

Teacher: Ones that are around your leg and at elbow height.

You feel like you are needed

Once more the teachers compared the spontaneity and physical closeness of the two year-olds with their experiences of four year-olds. Both on and off the record the teachers expressed the “specialness” of the snuggles, the hugs, the gentle “being taken by the hand”, the “coming up to you and their wee arms just go up and give you a cuddle”, and the nonverbal cues that formed much of the interaction between the teachers and the two year-olds. The following statement by one teacher captures how physical closeness of the two year-olds, and the nonverbal feedback felt a rewarding experience for several of the teachers:

Having children come to you, makes you feel good too. Especially the two year-olds - [they] do gravitate towards you, so you do feel really good about that. That they feel comfortable coming to you and sitting with you and sometimes they don't say a lot, but they're there and giving you things or handing you things and you just smile at them and they'll smile back. Those sorts of things are good.

The rewards of these young children forming a trusting relationship with the teachers was another ‘buzz’ for the teachers. They talked about being in a special and privileged position, when for any age child, that first relationship outside the family was entrusted to them as a kindergarten teacher:

Teacher: Often it's probably the first time someone, other than a family member, has actually had that responsibility for them, where they've actually stayed with someone outside the family. So that's a big step for some of them too. And that's really nice that they have formed a relationship outside the family.

Teachers spoke warmly about the sense of satisfaction they felt from the responsiveness of the children: “you just want to eat them. You can just really feed off their enthusiasm”. Other teachers mentioned the sense of satisfaction at different milestones that indicated that the children had learnt to trust them. Examples of this were the first time they did a nappy change for a new child which one teacher described as “a really lovely time to bond with that child”, or when the children settled and stopped crying, or when they cuddled the teachers or said goodbye and “you see them progress from where they started and develop

that sense of belonging”. Recognition of these emotional milestones made one teacher say “And you feel so proud!”

If you think they can do it - then they can

Teachers spoke about their daily work with two year-olds as something that in many cases their original teacher training had not prepared them adequately for. The following teachers recalled the impact of their first experiences with two year-olds in their programme:

Teacher 1: We got the rolls back up and then we experienced the issues - like we needed to change the taps.

Teacher 2: There were some alarming outcomes. Children developmentally were at completely different levels. Some would put all the equipment in to the water! Things started happening that never happened before. We had to rethink what you do and how you do it.

Teacher 1: We were baffled if it was a individual personality factor or just a developmental-age thing.

Teacher 2: We rushed to books.

This experiential impact described by Wellington teachers was echoed also by the Dunedin teachers who were also critical of their own expectations of children:

Teacher: Your own expectations. It came up, we had quite a good discussion the last couple of days, about those who have trained years ago and those who have trained more recently, as to how you actually see the role. You know, see two year-olds in the programme. Whereas we were probably brought up with three to five year-olds and others are bringing up from the two to five. And it’s a totally different perspective and you have to grow into that and you can’t just stick with your way and say: ‘Well that’s how I was trained’. That doesn’t happen, that’s not the reality of today. So you’ve actually got say: ‘Hey, well, where do my values and my place fit in with what’s actually happening?’.

Having professional support for this questioning and for building new teaching skills for the current context was a recurring discussion with the teachers who clearly understood that their expectations made a difference to children’s experiences as well as their own. This is how one teacher expressed her understanding:

Teacher: It's the teachers' expectations. If you expect them to be little babies and all those bla bla things, then that's what you will get. However, you do need to be realistic of what they can do and if you just set your expectation, like 'I expect you to sit down and eat your food' - eventually it will happen.

For one of the observers the impact of teachers' expectations was demonstrated on an occasion when a reliever used language that continually reinforced the smallness of a child, and his 'inability' to undertake tasks. The data in the excerpt below demonstrate how the reliever's assumption about what the child was not capable of doing, based largely on his size and, possibly, lack of verbal interactions, reinforced 'help seeking' behaviour in the child and removed any independent attempt at achieving a task that he had previously shown an ability to do: putting a ball through the hoop successfully. The child had also been previously observed engaging in problem-solving strategies for raising his own personal height by placing steps under the hoop to make it easier to reach.

The excerpt starts at a point when a group of three boys (all two year-olds) had been playing with 'ride-ons' on the path and then had headed to a wood chip area:

Relieving Teacher: Boys, come over and bring them [ride-ons] back onto the path (calling to them).

The Relieving Teacher walks over and takes hold of one of the boy's on a bike and wheels him onto the path. The other two boys follow.

Once on the path [case study child] turns around and heads over to the grass area where another boy [three years-old] is throwing a ball through a basketball hoop attached to the wall. [Case study child] grabs a ball and then calls out loudly (cry sound).

He runs over to another Kindergarten Teacher who is standing alongside the sand pit. She bends down and looks him in the eye and asks him: Do you want to put the ball in the hoop?

Meanwhile, the Relieving Teacher has moved over to the basket-ball hoop area and [case study child] turns and runs over to stand beside her. He stands close and watches the three year-old throwing a ball at the hoop several times. [Case study child] watches and laughs holding on tight to his ball the whole time.

Relieving Teacher (talking to the Case study child): Is that too hard for you? Would you like a turn? I'll lift you up.

She then lifts him up so that he can drop the ball into the hoop. They repeat this three times.

Other children begin to gather and watch. The Relieving Teacher turns to talk with the other children who have gathered and she decides to get more balls from the shed. As she moves to the shed [case study child] calls out in a loud voice: Lift me, help me.

He continues to call out to the relieving teacher as she moves off to the shed and he runs after her holding the ball.

The excerpt above stands in contrast to the following one in which a teacher who regularly observed the 'wisdom' and 'skill' of the two year-olds that she worked with, recounts a moment in which she realized that her expectations of two year-olds could be turned around from seeing children as lacking skills or capabilities to seeing them as learners and teachers. The teacher was in a case study kindergarten and recounted this example at one of the cluster group meetings which she had found beneficial for helping her reflect on her practice and changing her expectations of the capabilities of young two year-olds.

(Transcribed and edited from a cluster group and New Zealand Association for Research in Education conference, in Dunedin, 2005)

MICHELLE:

I was still new to having two year-olds in the programme. I had asked [two year-old child] to put his socks and shoes on because he was beginning to play on the wood chips and I was concerned that he might get splinters in his feet, after having been in the sand and having his shoes off. I really thought I was going to have to help him to put his socks and shoes on. But in the time that I was still fumbling around getting his shoelace untied he had very quickly got toes in the toe, heels in the heel. Next minute, he had a shoe on and just kept the shoelace done up, and I was still fumbling around, I think, with the shoelace. He had that on as well and before I knew it he had both shoes on. So it was just no barrier to him to be able to get back into the play. Whereas, sometimes you think with

older children, even, shoes can be a barrier. So I learnt a lot, very quickly, about two year-olds and their competencies.

(Later that same day with the same two year-old):

This child was having a look up in the tree. He spent time looking up into the branches of the tree. He listened and watched the leaves blowing in the wind. And he said: "shush". While holding his finger to his pursed lips, he talked in a whisper and told me that there were birds up in the tree, in a gentle way, so as not to frighten the birds. Another child was with him and was really intrigued and looking really carefully for the birds. And it was just one of those really superb, warm, fuzzy moments where all those things that we want for children to be imaginative and playful with their surroundings were happening and suddenly I wasn't the teacher, I was the learner with the teacher. It was fabulous.

It's being a team that makes it work

The importance of working as a team, with shared philosophies and visions for the children was raised as a factor that made for successful, and satisfying daily experiences for the teachers. The ability to have confidence in each other, also mediated for the lack of adults in the environment. If a teacher had confidence in the other staff, then she was more likely to take that extra moment with a child, or a parent. The teachers relayed how difficult having a reliever in the session was for this very reason: - for a two teacher kindergarten it could feel like a one-teacher session with all the children needing the care and attention from the known adult, and all the increased safety risks of the unknown environment for the reliever.

Teacher: An impact on your daily teaching, I feel, is your confidence in your colleagues. You know if you're busy, as you say [other teacher] in the toilets, but you know the team and you know the person that's working out there, you have confidence that that person will be comfortable in doing the things that need to be done. But if it's a reliever that needs a wee bit more support and you need to go and tell them: 'Can you do such and such and I'm going to have a story'. Or 'I need a story or how is that child going?' That impacts on a two-teacher team, particularly with very young ones and there maybe something happening, you just need to give them that wee bit of information to

support a child that they're working with out there and you're in here. So that's why I feel confidence is quite important.

This confidence and shared vision was important for teachers to continue to plan, evaluate and make things better for both the children and families and also for themselves as teachers.

Teacher: Yes, like I think you talk more in your team about how you can make it better. Actually - because you are feeling like that - you actually - I know we used to have lots of discussions about how we could make it better and I'm trying to think about the sorts of things that we did to improve it. But we were constantly talking about what was happening and how we could refine it. Like afternoon teas and things like that. Or even just, yeah, those things like sitting the children on the mat at the end of the day and things like that. Supporting each other more and more to make it better. It makes you have to work better in a team really.

The frustrations

Time, time, time

At the level of teachers' daily experiences, adult-child ratios in most kindergartens meant that teachers ended up "feeling bad" about the amount of time they were NOT having with individual children. One teacher described the difference in how she experienced kindergarten teaching between a time when there were eighteen children in the afternoon session to the current roll of forty-three children. Looking back, she said:

The enjoyment factor for me back then was much more. Sometimes, I come away from the afternoon session and I don't look forward to coming back. I feel bad about not spending time reading stories to kids because you're busy attending to kids who are having trouble settling and those with special needs.

Another teacher expressed a feeling of turning into a "supervisor" and "just scanning outside ... being a roving interacter". This lack of time was the constant concern raised by the staff, as it worked against their ability to have meaningful interactions with the children. Even in the smaller group sizes, and with increased adult-child ratios, the teachers felt that with the young children there was never enough time to do the job they wanted to do or would have liked to be

doing. The teachers talked about the “flying past”, the interruptions, and the “I’ll be back in a minute” that never happened.

Teacher: When you are actually trying to work with one child, like one-on-one and you have got a lot of little children coming up wanting something else, and someone hits themselves and you forget the child you were working one-on-one with, because safety is more important and you never get back to that child because something else happens. And unless you make a concerted effort and say to the other staff, ‘look you deal with that, I’m going to sit here for five minutes with one child’, it doesn’t happen, because it’s just too busy.

Time to spend with parents was another frustration. As discussed in Level Two, parents would have valued the time to talk with teachers and wished this could happen regularly. Likewise, teachers said they would like to be able to offer regular talking time to parents:

Teacher: I think time is a factor. You know time that you feel, as you say, working with this person, and you feel you need to do this and that parent’s coming and you needed to talk to them. And you know, how much more time would I spend with this person and this little one and I need to move on to tell somebody else such and such. It’s a time factor. And that anxiety of thinking: these children really need a story, they’re asking for a story but...so to me it’s just a time factor. Of not being able to spend that valuable time that I really wanted to spend with that child or that parent.

However, the teachers also identified that due to the different areas that the teachers were working within the environment, and the large group size, each teacher did not necessarily interact with every child each session. While this was a source of frustration for the teachers, it was also tinged with concern that parents would find this difficult to understand. The difficulty teachers had in being able to comment on a child’s afternoon is captured in this teacher’s statement:

Teacher: And unfortunately they all come in at the same time and they all leave at the same time and they’ve always virtually got the same questions like: how was my child today? And I know I’m so guilty of it, I just say: ‘oh, he’s had a really good day, fine,’ you know. And after you’ve said this sort of twenty, twenty-five times - well, really what was their child like?

The timing of the session and how long the children attended for, were seen to have a big impact on the quality of the session for children. Teachers from one

kindergarten spoke about the positive impact of their decision to have three two-hour afternoon sessions each week. They saw this as having turned out well for the children: “A two-hour session seems short ...but sometimes it’s long enough for the three-year olds”. These teachers had also decided to start their afternoon sessions at 1.30 pm rather than 1.00 pm to enable younger children to have a nap before session; this had been a response to the issue of “children not coming in for afternoon sessions because they have to have sleeps”. One teacher spoke at length about how “changing hours changes the whole pattern of things”.

Teaching and caring: An ambivalence

Overwhelmingly, the education versus care debate permeated throughout the cluster group discussions. While teachers completely acknowledged that one cannot happen without the other, the historical emphasis on education and learning which has shaped the kindergarten philosophy and parents’ understanding of the purpose and role of kindergartens, continued to dominate both the joys and the frustrations of the teachers.

Caring routines versus learning opportunities

A caring routine that illustrates the ambivalence among teachers about the relationship between teaching and caring that impacted on the teachers’ day, was the issue of nappy changing and toileting children: The topic received much attention in all discussions within the study.

We noted that some teachers saw nappy time as an opportunity for quality interaction and for “bonding time”. For other teachers, however, the reality of nappy changing was that it caused a dilemma for “the programme”. They talked about the time that changing nappies “took out” of the programme and about the interruption that this made to interactions within the session. For these teachers, the most significant aspect of nappy changes was that it removed the teacher from the ability to supervise the other children. Examples were shared of toileting accidents which required two teachers to clean up the environment and change the child. In a two-teacher kindergarten toileting tasks left one teacher with the logistical impossibility of supervising the remaining 29 children. One

teacher summed up the dilemma in this way: “it should be a bonding, quality time, but it can’t be when you need to rush back to the programme”.

Teacher: The frustration a lot of the time is that you are spending a lot of your time working with toileting and those sorts of things and actually not with the learning. You know - just getting in with those groups of children ... that are perhaps missing out because you are busy with somebody else doing the toileting.

The introduction of non-trained adults, such as teacher aides, to assist with the caring routines in kindergarten was discussed by the teachers at the cluster groups as a strategy to ensure that the trained teachers were able to spend more time in ‘teaching interactions’ with the children.

However, even this strategy, which introduced an extra pair of hands, carried within it a tension: One teacher, who had a teacher aide, mentioned that at times she wondered if the teacher-aide actually knew the young children better than she did herself, as the teacher aide was the one who got to share those very ‘personal’ moments with the child.

The ambivalence about caring routines versus learning opportunities continued in some of the teachers’ comments which suggested that aspects of their work with two-year olds sometimes required them to “turn into a mother”. As one teacher explained: “Some are still in nappies: They need that nurturing, that baby loving...They’re needy. It’s more of a nursery interaction with them”. This comment was greeted by the rejoinder from another teacher: “We still have 4 year-olds that want that”.

The following statement by another teacher provides an additional perspective on what some teachers’ reality was like:

With some of our ethnic groups they (children) are adored and loved until the next baby comes along. They still need it but they don’t get it. So we give it to them. It’s the mothering they bring out in you. I feel emotion for them because some are just little peanuts. It’s nice. This is our community. We are a loving community. It’s time consuming, but there’s a physical and emotional interaction.

These comments indicate that contrasting and ambivalent views dominated debates about the role of caring routines in kindergarten teaching. The

differences were firstly about whether “mothering”, “nurturing” and caring routines were things that only occurred in the context of working with two year-olds in kindergarten, as opposed to being an integral part of work with all age-groups in that setting, and secondly, there were contrasting views about whether “mothering” was a legitimate part of what kindergarten was about.

One teacher explained that the tension in these contrasting views was also echoed outside of the kindergarten itself. She noted that in an Education Review Office’s (ERO) review of a kindergarten, in 2004, concerns had been raised at the time taken out of the session with the amount of caring duties that a particular kindergarten completed during a review visit:

Teacher: [Name] were commenting about their ERO report and that how much ERO had picked up that too much time was spent on the caring duties and a lot of time that wasn’t actually incorporated in learning as such, the learning opportunity for children.

Interviewer: This is what ERO said?

Teacher: There it is in black and white and then, why ... do the reviewers not actually see those as learning opportunities? Because that’s a major part of your programme.

Extending the older children

An interesting aspect for teachers who participated in the study was that their awareness of their practices with two year-olds in their programmes became more reflective, they also began to wonder if their older children were now becoming the more 'invisible' children.

Teacher: I also think [now] that the three years aren’t getting extended, not – I shouldn’t say three year olds, I’m not – ages and stages – I’m thinking of the children that have been here for a lot longer, who know the routines, who know what it’s all about, who are quite capable but maybe don’t get that extra extension with help with just say even cutting And do I really know where those children are anymore? Because I’m not actually spending enough time with them to know where they’re at and what they’re doing. Some of them I do – some of them I don’t ... and they’ve already got the skills to be socially involved in their own play and sustain it. And that’s all very well and fine, however, what am I actually doing as a teacher to extend that learner? Yeah.

The parents in this study too raised concerns about the consequences when their child turned four, of having been at the same kindergarten since they were two years olds. Several parents mentioned that this might mean that the children would be “ready for school sooner”. Concern that the child might be bored in the future was regularly mentioned by parents. Teachers themselves identified that this could be a challenge but one that they already faced with many of their four year-olds who were in need of different activities and experiences. In a time where there is much pressure on parents to choose sessions at the school for school preparation this is going to be an increasing challenge for kindergartens.

Summary of insights and strategic relevance

This level of analysis has shown that despite some reported reluctance when two year-olds began to participate in the kindergarten sessions, the daily experience of teachers’ work in both Dunedin and Wellington enabled them to readily supply lists of the joys of working with two year-olds. The joys included watching the two year-olds’ rapid growth over an extended period, observing their competence, satisfaction at responding to children’s need for a sense of belonging and physical closeness, and the realisation that teacher expectations about two year-olds’ inabilities can be turned around to create empowering expectations for these very young children.

Weighted against these joys were the frustrations of lack of time, and ambivalence about how caring and “mothering” experiences in the course of their daily work with two year-olds sat alongside the more traditional kindergarten teaching activities which parents as well as agencies, such as ERO, see as the legitimate learning experiences in kindergarten. The clear divide between those activities which teachers perceived to be ‘care’, and those which they perceived to be ‘teaching’, demonstrated also that the teachers themselves sometimes had difficulty in perceiving the caring tasks of a young child (changing nappies for example) as a ‘teachable moment’ or an opportunity for a ‘responsive relationship’.

One key strategic relevance of these findings is that there is a need to re-define which *processes of teaching and learning* are a legitimate part of kindergarten life.

This point has additional strategic relevance as it relates to the *future possibilities* for professional development of kindergarten teachers.

It is also relevant for future policy development that might change the conditions that currently limit teachers in their ability to reconceptualise caring routines as legitimate parts of their teaching, consistent with an ethic of care approach (Dallie, 2003; Goldstein, 1998, 2002) to early childhood practice.

Level Four: The nation's beliefs and values about children and early childhood care and education

Introduction

Our focus for this level was to examine the macro factors which impact on the experiences of the under-three year-olds in the kindergarten environment. We discussed many factors in the cluster group discussions and surveyed the associations through the national kindergarten questionnaire. Twenty-nine of the thirty-two associations replied to the questionnaire (91% return rate) and their responses describe the contexts of kindergartens over the previous five years with regard to two year-olds (See Appendix I for full details of the survey). The interviews with teachers and parents also demonstrated some of the wider influences on the kindergartens and the lives of the two year-olds. Examining the literature on quality early childhood education for under-threes, also informed this level of analysis.

New Zealand kindergartens and two year olds

Attending kindergarten at two years-old

Kindergartens are licensed for children from the age of two years and older. Interestingly, there are no licensing restrictions on the number of two year-olds¹ in a session, that is, there is no minimum or maximum number.

The national survey of kindergarten associations presented an interesting picture of enrolment of two year-olds and the associated issues for 2004 and 2005. In 2004 19 associations identified that they had two year-olds enrolled, and in 2005 this had increased to 21. The percentage of children who were two ranged from 0.5% to 12% of all children in 2004, and 0.5% to 11% in 2005. One of the reasons for this slight drop in percentage may be attributable to the stability of the groups of children - the younger the children start, the longer they stay at the

¹ The early childhood regulations are being reviewed as this report is being written and the group sizes and age bands are being re-examined, and so this may change for kindergartens in the future.

kindergarten, and the older the resulting age for starting kindergarten becomes. This may not apply however, to kindergartens with a high turnover of children due to other factors such as transient communities.

However, the numbers of two year-olds have risen at the same pace as all children attending kindergartens and have remained at a national percentage of 2% of all children since 2004. See Table 3:

Table 3: Enrolment at kindergartens

	2004	2005
Number of all children enrolled at kindergarten	33,471	38,331
Number of 2 year-olds enrolled at kindergarten	772 (2%)	956 (2%)

While, nationally, this is a small number, this disguises the much higher percentage of two year-olds in individual kindergarten associations, and indeed in individual kindergartens within each association, as shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Association enrolment - 2004

# OF KINDERGARTENS IN ASSOCIATION	# OF ALL CHILDREN ENROLLED	# OF 2 YEAR-OLDS ENROLLED	
		#	%
1	75	2	3
2	181	21	12
3	162	2	1
3	179	5	3
5	365	5	1
13	1020	5	0.5
15	1041	13	1
15	1100	33	3
16	1040	110	11
19	1443	14	1
20	725	25	3
22	1357	31	2
22	1478	133	9
29	2291	19	1
51	3521	197	6
56	4188	65	2
62	4836	56	1
108	8469	36	0.5
462 (total)	33,471 (total)	772 (total)	2 (total)

Just as there are geographical differences in two year-old enrolments, so there are differences within each association. For example, as discussed earlier, in Dunedin kindergartens (see Table 1, p. 2) the numbers of two year-olds ranged from as low as two to as many as 17 (in a group of 30). In Wellington, the range was from 1 two-year old in a kindergarten to a maximum of 12.

The introduction of two year-olds into kindergartens

Two year-olds have been present in kindergarten sessions for many years. However, they were often in only very small numbers - one or two - and usually started close to turning three years of age (historically, the more 'usual' starting age for kindergarten). Kindergarten memories relate how most kindergarten associations also had a 'rule of thumb' about how many two-year olds could be included, for safety reasons. A teacher in the cluster group in Dunedin identified:

Going back many, many years ago you were only allowed a certain proportion of children under-three and I think it might have been about five per session. So if you had thirty children you were only allowed three under-three year-olds because it wasn't considered safe to have children so young in the session because everything was geared for three and four year-olds.

In Wellington, one teacher said: "The unofficial policy was 10%; if you have 40 kids then you shouldn't have more than four under-3s".

The teachers in this study identified the need to have full rolls as the key reason behind the introduction of two year-olds in kindergarten. The introduction of bulk funding (1992) changed the way that kindergartens were funded, leading to new pressures to have not only full rolls, but to keep them full at all times. Other studies have discussed the impact of this funding policy change on the kindergarten service (see Davison, 1996, 1997; Duncan, 2001a; Wilson & Houghton, 1995; Wilson, Houghton, & Piper, 1996; Wylie, 1992, 1993) so it will not be discussed here except for its contribution to the changing age groups who are now attending kindergartens nationwide.

As the decline in rolls and the traditional 'waiting lists' began to create spaces for children in sessions, taking younger and younger children into the session

became the obvious way to maintain full rolls and thus ensure viability of the kindergarten and protection of teacher positions. One teacher in Dunedin said:

The reason why we're taking them...comes down to just keeping our rolls up But it's that concern of always trying to keep up your numbers and having to bring in a two year-old who's just turned two for the sake of keeping up your roll numbers. Rather than it's just the best reason for the child to start.

Similarly, a Wellington teacher said that her kindergarten first started to think about enrolling under-threes "when the roll became a bit low". Another added: "We thought we might be able to take kids that are just about three years old. I looked at the licence and it said "over-two's", so we could take over-two's. We thought we just did over-three's and four's and not under-three's".

Interestingly, a clear directive to take under-threes into sessions was not issued by Associations. However, as early as 1997 the Dunedin Kindergarten Association's policy on its management of kindergarten rolls required that "kindergartens maintain rolls to a minimum of 99% ". The policy goes on to mention:

For rolls to be maintained it may be necessary to bring in under-3 year olds, incorporate the playgroup into an afternoon session or look at other alternatives. (Dunedin Kindergarten Association, 1997, p. 1)

To keep the rolls full meant, for most kindergartens, taking the next child on the list - the two year-old. Recalling the time when her kindergarten made the decision to enrol under-threes, one Wellington teacher saw the decision as also connected to the policy of diversification. She said: "there wasn't an announcement, it just happened. We were talking about diversification with the Association at the time". Another teacher recalled:

We got a newsletter about diversification. There weren't low rolls in every kindergarten. Those with low rolls got contacted. They could be proactive themselves to fix the rolls. We had meetings in kindergarten; minuted meetings. The Association visited. They gave us information on different options, hours and how we could change our hours and the funding would still be viable.

In the Wellington Association, a policy on diversification approved in June 2001, does not mention the enrolment of under-three year olds as an option and defines diversification as:

[A]ny of the following: change to starting/finishing times, changed session days, change of session structure e.g., family/vertical groupings, change of number of children in sessions, change of teachers.

Similarly, the enrolment and admission policy talks only about the admission of children “according to age” (July 2002) or “in age order” (February 2004) and does not specify a starting age. A teacher said: “They said we didn’t have to take under three’s... but when it comes to funding, when a two-year old comes, we take them”.

In Dunedin, one teacher said:

The expectation was there, but nobody told you, you know you had that feeling you had to have, whatever number it was, that wonderful number Nobody said I had to take under-threes but you heard that others had two year-olds so, ‘Oh well. I’ve got to keep my numbers up’. But it was a real pressure wasn’t it? It was the pressure of maintaining your rolls. And adjusting, no training, nothing, they just happened to be there.

Therefore, for most of the teachers the two year-olds arrived serendipitously, without advance planning and without additional training or support for the teachers, who in most cases, were unfamiliar with working with these very young children.

Other options for keeping rolls full were also attempted in several Dunedin and Wellington kindergartens, both in an attempt to maintain the viability of the kindergartens but, in some cases, also to avoid taking on large numbers of two year-olds. Some kindergartens changed from offering two sessions daily (morning for the older children, and afternoon for the younger children) to a mixed-age session in the morning (from two to five year-olds in group sizes of 40-45 children). Alongside this, in 2000, in some kindergartens, the hours for sessions were changed with a longer session in the morning (4 hours instead of 3.5) and a shorter session in the afternoon (2 hours instead of 2.5). More recently

a six-hour extended session has also been provided. The financial gains from these changes were initially used to fund additional part-time staffing positions in kindergartens with high needs (including kindergartens with large numbers of two year-olds), but these have not been maintained.

Another Dunedin innovation was to re-deploy teachers from the restructured kindergartens with the newly-created single session, to assist in the afternoon sessions of kindergartens with under-threes.

Teacher: Well, it was keeping us in a full-time job. We were working full-time but we had no afternoon session so it was just sort of a normal full-time job.

Interviewer: But shared location?

Teacher: Shared location I've been put down to a 0.9² and supposed to go into another kindergarten and [other teachers]' a 0.8 and a 0.6. So to give us full-time, like we did in the past, we'd go to another kindergarten.

This teacher, however, went on to describe how this situation had not been able to be maintained as the Association had been unable to continue to pay them full wages.

Teacher: And that's because we don't keep full rolls, basically. There isn't the funding coming in to support the teachers who are in Dunedin generally at the higher level of the scale.

Likewise, the move to a single session, with extended hours, did not prevent the decline in numbers and the introduction of two year-olds as had been anticipated.

Teacher: I think it's really interesting that the kindergartens whose rolls have dropped over time, who've gone to the extended session, still have really high numbers of two year olds, in actual fact, in that new sessional structure that they've got.

Teacher: And also like the pressure, I'm not sure what age they're coming into, but with the older twenty children staying for the extended sessions as well too, the age is dropping and they're getting younger and younger and with the younger children moving up into it it's not actually doing what it was intended to [extension work for the older children].

² A full time position is 1.0, so part-time position are divided in percentages of full time.

In our national survey we asked associations to choose which factors from a list had contributed to the enrolment of two year-olds in their kindergartens. Falling demographics (86%) and ‘continuation of the kindergarten’ (76%) were the most commonly chosen reasons. See Figure 2:

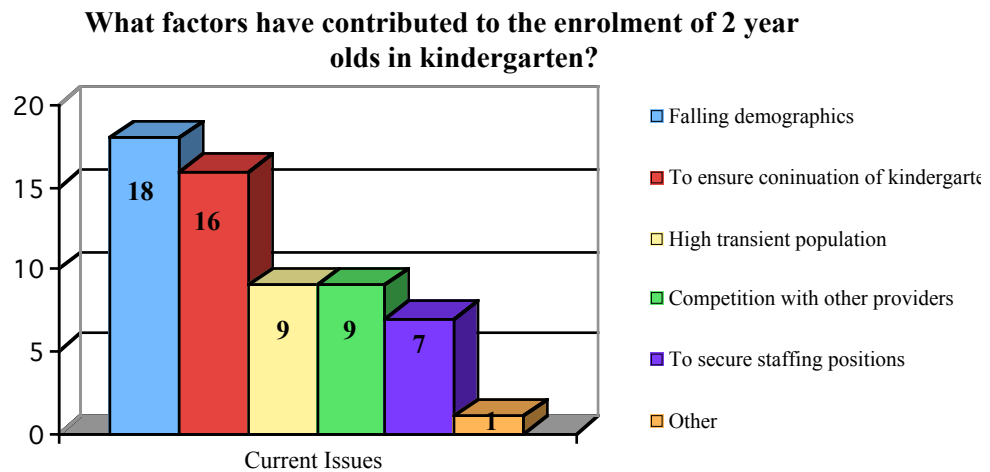


Figure 2: Factors contributing to the enrolment of two year-olds at kindergarten

Responding to transient communities (43%), competition with other early childhood services (43%), and to secure staffing positions (33%) were also high in the list of reasons.

Awareness of the two year-olds

We asked the associations to indicate on a scale of 0 to 5 (0 = not at all significant and 5 = very significant) the factors that brought the attendance of two year-olds to their attention. For the majority of associations (66%) their awareness of two year-olds in kindergartens had occurred since 2000, yet 19% indicated that it had been an issue for them since the 1990s. We had identified the 1990s as a time of policy and funding change for the kindergarten service, and had been interested to see if this had impacted on the introduction of larger numbers of two year-olds in the service.

The associations identified that it was teachers (75%), and senior teachers (45%), who alerted them to the issues of two year-olds in their associations. The

majority did not rate ‘numbers of two year-olds’, or ‘external review’ as factors in this at all. However, two associations indicated that the ‘number of two year-olds’ was ‘very significant’: one of these associations had 8% of their enrolments aged under-three and the other had 2%. Again, these averages may not capture the number of children in individual kindergartens within the association, where a high percentage in a particular kindergarten would be a significant issue for group size.

The impact of external review was raised in the Dunedin cluster group. An Education Review Office (ERO) inspection in 2002 created much discussion in the association around recommended changes within the kindergarten environments to reflect the increased numbers of two year-olds. The reviewers informed the kindergartens that they must have ‘defined areas’ for the under-threes. They recommended signs, indicating these areas, and barriers to keep the children ‘safe’.

Teacher: We were told we had to provide an under-three play area...you had to have a sign up...and you had to have it in a way that it was closed off... It was a wonderful plastic fantastic conversation. We did it and separated it with wood. Of course we were telling the children ‘they’re safe’ and that this was for the younger children. And what happened? Of course, all the older children rushed in. And we just knew straight away it wasn’t going to work. But it was a requirement so we did it. So we still have the remnants of an under-three designated play area. But it didn’t work. So we had all these fancy signs for when they came back. And suddenly then you didn’t need a sleeping area because it was only for kindergartens that operated for longer than four hours.

The confusion of this ‘multi-message’ approach about two year-olds in kindergartens appeared to be a common situation within the sector as the numbers of two year-olds increased. It seemed to the teachers that policy and procedures, as well as professional development or programme support, were reactive to the situation rather than proactive, and decisions were made on the spot without wider consultation or understanding of kindergarten philosophies and practices. One Wellington teacher explained:

We had ERO in and we were talking to them about how busy the afternoon sessions are and how there’s so little time to do some things. And ERO didn’t really care. They couldn’t respond and didn’t want to

discuss the situation. For example, 80 kids sharing '2 spaces', part-time attendees taking up places. They couldn't see that having young kids in the afternoon was an issue. They don't know the difference between kindergarten and childcare. There's 58 children and only 40 places. Some don't all come for the 3 days. No day is the same. They need to understand the complexities and the situation, especially ERO and the association.

The teachers openly discussed the different recommendations and advice that they received in their kindergartens, from both ERO and the associations. Often, tensions arose between different kindergartens as the apparent 'ad hoc decision making' left teachers feeling that decisions were inequitable across kindergartens:

Teacher 1: I was talking to [Senior Teacher] about the sixteen children that are going to school in August and September and that has a huge impact on the roll. That's 50%. And we were talking then about the ages and so I said 'Well, two and-a-half year-olds is where I'm going. And she accepted that.

Teacher 2: We heard through the grapevine that some kindergartens were saying: 'No, I'm not taking two year-olds or under-three year-olds' in their programme. And yet others are being questioned that they have been...maintaining twenty-nine and twenty-eight at two and a half.

Teacher 1: But I think, you know, what's happened is with the different senior teachers that we've got, you know different problems, there's been different approaches.

Teacher 3: And that's what I'm just wondering, whether it's just gossip, or whether it's the head teacher's interpretation? ... sometimes messages get put across differently. I know ... different kindergartens, and I know they don't have the same age children as what we do and their rolls aren't full, so how do they get away with it and yet we don't?

Policies about two year-olds in kindergartens: Survey data

In an online discussion group where this project was raised as a topic of interest, in 2003, a contributor discussed their own association's decision about numbers of two year-olds in any one kindergarten:

We have a “rule of thumb” where we consider five under-three's to be the most we can manage in a session and still preserve the quality of the experience for both the under and over-three's. (Richards, 2003)

As noted earlier, our discussions with teachers had revealed a similar “rule of thumb” approach to deciding numbers of under-threes in kindergartens. This prompted us to explore the issue in our national survey. One of our questions asked associations to indicate any policies they had, and any changes they had made, within their association, to cater specifically for two year-olds. Only one association identified any particular written policy in place.

Another association wrote:

The association traditionally has had a management plan re. enrolment of children under three-years which restricts the number in any one session up to five of the total roll of children attending.

With regards to specific changes made for two year-olds, the commonly identified areas of change were in the areas of ‘programme and curriculum’ adjustments (57%), and ‘extra staffing’ (52%).

Programme and curriculum changes were described generally as teachers working to support the very young child's wellbeing and belonging, responding to the interests of the very young, and modifying environments to meet the developmental needs of two year-olds.

In the survey, extra staffing was most often described as teacher aides (to support with toileting and behaviour); or flexible additional staffing - either part-time (for example, 0.2 of a full time position) or provided on need.

Other changes identified in the survey were of ‘extra resources’ (38%), ‘to outdoor environment’ (33%), and ‘shorter session times’ (28%). Significantly, associations identified reduced rolls, both shorter and longer sessions, and

family/whānau grouping, as their most common responses to having two year-olds in kindergarten. Interestingly, while the associations identified that shorter sessions times (two hour sessions) and reduced rolls worked to meet the needs of the children, these changes were identified as uneconomic and it was suggested that these strategies would not be able to be sustained (see Box 3, Appendix I).

The associations were also given the opportunity to identify any other changes or issues. Seven replied with responses that identified the needs of the teachers in their association; for example, identifying the need for professional development for their staff which was specific to this age group, and recognising the increased demands on their teachers.

Current issues for two year-olds in kindergartens

As part of the national survey, associations were asked about current issues for their kindergartens, with regard to their two year-olds. As with the earlier questions they were provided with a list to choose from and an option for adding any other issues.

Multiple issues were identified by 19 of the 21 associations who answered this question. The most common areas identified were ‘programming’ and ‘funding to improve staff: child ratios’. Interestingly, these were also the areas where more than half of the associations had already implemented changes to cater specifically for the two year-olds. See Table 5:

Table 5: Current issues within the associations in relation to the attendance of two year-olds at kindergarten

Current Issue	# of associations	
None	2	11%
Teaching Practices	10	53%
Programming	13	68%
Curriculum goals	6	32%
Funding to enable improved staff:child ratio	13	68%
Physical environment	11	58%
Equipment	10	53%
Changing regulations	6	32%
Unreliable attendance	12	63%
Changes to session structure	4	21%

We also asked them to identify any general restructuring or diversification that had occurred in their association over the last ten years, so as to look at the overall policies and planning of the associations which impact on all of the children, and not just the two year-olds.

The most common changes that the 28 replying associations reported making were in 'extended morning sessions' (89%) and 'programme and curriculum changes' (71%). The examples provided by the associations of the changes that had occurred reveal that the increased funding that accrued from longer sessions was a strong shaper of the changes made. The higher funding enabled the kindergartens to either remain open (viable), or to employ additional staff (administration and teaching) (see Box 6, Appendix I). Significantly, one association, with 51 kindergartens and 222 (6%) children aged two-years, described the changes made to sessions as:

To meet community need and retain viability rather than catering for a particular age group. The 6-hour sessions reduce ratios to 10:1 so groups changed to 40 children with 4 staff from 45/45 with 3 staff. Staff indicate this has substantially reduced stress and provides a better service to children/families.

Teacher: child ratio and group sizes in kindergartens for the under-three year-olds

Improving the teacher:child ratio in kindergartens with under-three year-olds was acknowledged as a significant concern for the national associations as well as the teachers in this study.

Both national and international research has demonstrated that qualified teacher-to-child ratio makes a difference for quality experiences in early childhood education (Smith, 1999; Smith, et al., 2000). A study conducted in 1994 of the Wellington Kindergarten Association to look at the introduction of increased group sizes (from 40 to 45 children) showed that the teachers believed that the increased group sizes had a direct impact on children, programmes, teachers and families (Renwick & McCauley, 1995). The major issues presented by the Wellington teachers in 1994 were:

- They had less time to work with individual children and small groups;
- Even though the adult/child ratio remained constant at 1:15, the larger group size was overwhelming for young children and had a marked impact on the type of activities teachers were able to offer;
- Teachers were being forced more towards a supervisory role, rather than being able to focus on the educative role for which they had been trained;
- Increased roll numbers had an adverse diluting effect on teachers' relationships with parents. Ninety families were too many for teachers to get to know and interact with effectively;
- In some kindergartens children were being admitted at a younger age which placed extra demands on teachers;
- There had been little training or support for teachers to cope with the consequences of the new policy. (Renwick & Mc Cauley, 1995).

Our study shows that little has changed from these findings ten years later. The teachers in this study, reflecting on their teaching experiences with the two year-olds produced a list of challenges which matched this 1994 research (see Level Three findings).

Session hours and times for two year-olds

Historically, the younger children have attended afternoon sessions at kindergartens, and in the four case study kindergartens it was afternoons that we observed. However, due to the changes within associations not all two year-olds attend in the afternoon, and changes in the length and the times of sessions were indicated as a significant national change.

In kindergartens which had changed to single morning sessions with extended hours, and children aged from two years old, there were concerns that the two-year olds were very tired, and that the parents themselves did not necessarily want their two year-olds to be attending for a four-hour session, or for five mornings a week:

Teacher: We're also finding too that our parents only want, at the max, usually three sessions a week for our two year olds. Because we have a

four-hour session for them, they find that's enough, and there's been no pressure to make them come five mornings either.

A consequence of the children not attending every day, and the requirement for full rolls to be maintained at all times, has been that more children are being introduced from the waiting list to fill the places that the younger children do not maintain over the week. This structural change clearly is financially necessary for kindergartens, but it also adds to the group of even younger children entering kindergarten. This raised concerns for teachers about the experience of being a two year-old in a group size of 45. One teacher asked:

How stressful is it to bring a two year-old into a group of forty-five children, you know, for the child? Do we really consider that child? that actually coming in and introducing that child to forty-four other children.... That's an awful lot for a two year-old, first day and seeing this sea of faces.

The tiredness of the two year-olds was raised by all the teachers, whether the children attended in the morning or the afternoon. Teachers who had children in the extended morning programmes (4-6 hours) reported that they had suggested to parents that the younger children should be collected earlier - before the tears and tiredness set in:

Teacher: We started seeing if they would pick them up at twelve, because I mean twelve o'clock til twelve thirty it was just – they were all starting to cry and you know they'd been there too long.

Summary of insights and strategic relevance

This level of our analysis has used two data sets: discussions by teachers of macro factors that they perceived to impact on experiences with two year-olds in their kindergartens, and data from the national survey sent to associations in 2005.

Each data set reveals a situation of change.

At the level of the teachers' lived experience within their kindergartens, teachers were engaged with, and preoccupied by, concerns of what was or was not

possible for a two year-old in a large group size and with a limited number of trained adults available. We became familiar with statements that said:

[Y]ou don't feel like you've had a lot of quality time with children. You feel like you just flit from one thing to another. And I do put that down to group size.

As our level three analysis showed, a further shift was also happening for teachers as their new working conditions with two year-olds in a context of structural constraints forced them to face the tension in their work between the caring/ mothering routines and their more "traditional" kindergarten teaching practices. This was resulting in some re-thinking of the place of care in their professional practice.

At the level of the associations, our national survey showed that they too were engaged in re-thinking their practices about how best to meet the needs of families and children in their region. This was reflected in the various ways that associations had made changes to their policies and strategic planning. The necessity to maintain full rolls to enable the continuation of the kindergarten within associations, has clearly shaped new structures within the kindergartens (sessions and hours), introduced younger children to the sessions. It has also changed traditionally age-segregated structures into combinations of mixed age sessions.

At both the level of lived experience, and the level of association policy, the catalyst for change clearly originated in the macro context of early childhood policy at the national level.

The strategic relevance of these findings is that the data establishes a picture that had not yet existed of the complex micro context in which kindergarten teachers currently work within the broader (macro) context of association policy and strategic planning. In this picture, the world of kindergarten teaching is revealed as no longer homogenous either within associations or across them: It seems to us that a homogenous approach to kindergarten no longer exists in New Zealand.

We wish to note that this analysis is not about which service or centre provides better for two year-olds, nor about which change has been the most successful or should be applied across the kindergartens.

What this study demonstrates, however, is that different services do provide different experiences for two year-olds.

In the case of two year-olds in kindergartens, the children's experiences emerged from a combination of factors that had to do with philosophies and with structures. The difficulties that undermine the best possible provisions for children in kindergarten are the same difficulties that would undermine provision in any other early childhood centre: large group sizes and low (trained) teacher:child ratios. This was summed up very well by one of the case study kindergarten teachers in her reflections on how, as the group size in her care grew, the difficulties increased:

Well, I think probably, for me, I spoke very briefly about it before, but the issue that's come through is the more children you've got, the less time you've got to spend with children and we don't get to know them. So we **can't** answer those five or six statements: do you know me? Can I trust you? Do you let me fly? Do you hear me? Is this place fair?

Conclusion

Our research questions for this study were:

- I. What are the experiences of under-three year-olds in the kindergarten setting?
- II. What factors within the kindergarten environment support positive experiences for the under-three year-olds?
- III. What factors impact on teachers for positive environments and practices when working with the under-three year-olds in their kindergartens?
- IV. What macro factors impact on the experiences of the under-three year-olds in the kindergarten environment?

We have discussed the findings, which have addressed these questions, under four levels of analysis derived from a way of understanding learning used in the early childhood curriculum document, *Te Whāriki*, (Ministry of Education, 1996) and adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Using these four levels has enabled us to look at the child in context, the teacher in context, and the kindergarten service in context. By using these levels as our "multiple lenses" (Fleer, 2002), we have begun to build 'new foundations' with the teachers in this study: a foundation that has challenged the deficit model of a toddler and has celebrated the competent two year-old. We conclude with a final overview discussion of the findings within three of the strategic priorities for the *Teaching and Learning Research Initiative*: Reducing inequalities, understanding the processes of teaching and learning, and exploring future possibilities.

1. Reducing inequalities

As the teachers reflected on the observations in the case study kindergartens, and shared discussions in the cluster groups, they became more aware of the experiences of all the children in their sessions. Not only did they focus on the two year-olds with an intensity that had mostly not occurred before, but they also reflected on the impact of the two year-olds, in the programme, on the other children. This was particularly so for the teachers in the wider mixed-age setting, who often discussed the rights of all the children attending the session, and how to manage this in the large group setting.

The differences between the kindergartens themselves, were also explored. The four case study kindergartens themselves demonstrated different contexts, environments, and experiences for the children and teachers. The national survey further described changes to the provisions of kindergarten-style early childhood education for two year-olds that have resulted in a kindergarten service nationwide that is less than homogenous. While the arrival of two year-olds in kindergartens is not a national experience, the reality for some of our two year-olds (2% of all children enrolled nationally) is that they are attending kindergarten. The issue of quality experiences for the two year-olds that do attend kindergarten, is something that will continue to need to be addressed.

Furthermore, there is also an issue of access. Subsequent to the conclusion of data gathering for this study, we were disturbed to be advised by two of the case study children's families who moved from the case study kindergartens, that their children were unable to 'transfer' to another kindergarten in different cities, as their children were declared too young to be attending. The fact that in both cases the children had been attending afternoon sessions for more than six months was not considered relevant. This inequitable access for these children is an example of a lack of flexibility in addressing the individual needs of children within their local community. It is also an example of the pitfalls of diversification where different policies apply across different kindergarten associations or between kindergartens in the same association.

2. Understanding the processes of teaching and learning

The teachers involved in this study have increased their understanding of working with two year-olds in the kindergarten context. Our findings show that the Dunedin teachers who participated in the complete two year cycle of the study reported the impact on their teaching practices - both in gaining new insights into working with, planning and providing for two year-olds, and in their own ways of working as a team with children and family/whānau.

Our Level Three analysis also shows that teachers in both Dunedin and Wellington were challenged by the increase of “caring routines” in their practice through the increased number of two year-olds in their kindergarten. This engaged them in discussions of the role of ‘caring’ with routines in their practice and resulted in an ambivalence that was not yet resolved during our study. We suggest these discussions contributed to new thinking about understanding the process of early childhood teaching and the learning potential for children from caring routines.

Becoming a kindergarten child

The two year-olds very quickly accepted and adopted the behaviours of 'being a kindy kid', doing what was expected of them in a kindergarten. They fitted into the rules and routines of the environment, they built up skills and confidence and approached social relationships (with adults and other children) with a variety of experience and enthusiasm. What was noticeable from the observations was that the nature of the previous experience of the child, with the kindergarten, seemed to impact more on whether they are confident and acquired the 'community of practice' of the kindergarten smoothly or not. For example, as mentioned, children who have already experienced the kindergarten from an older sibling attending appeared to be at an advantage over the ‘first timers’.

While the ‘settling in’ differed for each child, the parents were more concerned about leaving their two year-old than an older child (although there were some exceptions to this) and had expectations that the teachers would be available for their child. They also would have liked more information on their child’s daily experiences, although they recognised that the teachers’ were busy at the end of session and were not always available. We found it interesting that the parents did not have a clear idea of their child’s experiences and found the photos we had taken to be an insight into their child’s time. The praise and delight that parents showed in viewing the photos supports the current assessment practices emerging in kindergartens for the use of portfolios with narratives and accompanying photos.

Teachers' expectations

Another interesting observation, which is not unsurprising, is that the expectations of the teachers, and the resulting interactions and practices that followed, shaped the experiences of the children. For example, if the child was seen to be "too little to do that" then they didn't, but if it was expected that they would carry out the behaviour, or complete the routine, they would. What we did find surprising was that age did not make the significant difference that we had expected to the teacher's expectations. For example, the same perceptions of the children were applied to a beginning kindergarten child irrespective of their age at starting: The same concerns were raised by teachers in the cluster groups over children starting at 2 years 10 months as those starting a 2 years 0 months. This in fact tells us more about the practices of being and becoming a kindergarten child than it does about the age of a child.

So, the experiences surrounding the becoming of a 'kindergarten kid' appear to be the same whether the child is 2, 3, or 4 years old. The experiences of settling in involves learning the rules and routines of the environment – both the structural and social environment – the people, places and things, no matter what the child's age. Arguably, these expectations, which shape the daily experiences of the kindergarten, have the potential to position two year-olds as very capable and competent - in contrast to the developmental deficit model of the 'toddler'.

However, despite positive perceptions by the teachers of the children and the adjustments to the programmes, which have been made to maximise the experience for the children, the increased physical support, which a two year-old DOES require necessitates more trained adults in the programme. Our observations demonstrated the 'fall out' in the programme for the other children when a teacher was attending to a two year-old (toileting or similar tasks) and the numerous missed teaching and learning opportunities for both the teacher and the children. Likewise, we have observed accidents on the outdoor equipment that could only have been prevented by an adult stationed at the equipment (and not blinking!). While these issues may be similar for all centres which have the very young child, the lack of enough trained teachers and the large numbers of children, at any one time in a kindergarten setting exacerbate these.

Emphasis on routines and the learning environment

We considered the learning environment at each level of the study. As discussed the teachers placed emphasis on the importance of routines to: build security, ease the transition for the child and the parent, initiate the children into ‘being a kindy kid’, set expectations for children and parents, and to ‘up the ante’ in children’s behaviour. Reflecting on the amount of time that was spent in structured routines such as washing hands, afternoon tea and mat times, began some thoughtful discussion between teachers about the purpose and use of these times. Several teachers began to question and to change some of these routines to reflect the difficulties that the two year-olds experienced with these times.

The teachers, themselves, relied heavily on their teaching environments to compensate for the lack of one-on-one teacher-child interaction. Not only were safety issues a major concern for all kindergartens, where changes were regularly made for the physically smaller children, but also the appropriateness, amount of, and quality of resources was a recurring consideration. While the teachers in our case study kindergartens made several major changes in their environment, after reflecting on how the kindergarten looks from a two year-old perspective, other teachers in the cluster groups reported rearranging their environment, and rethinking the type of and amount of resources they supplied for the younger children. The difficulty in maintaining the programme in the mixed-age setting continued to be a balance, where safety continued to be the prime consideration.

Trusting reciprocal relationships

Underlying all the observations of and discussions about the two year-old children were the notions of building and establishing meaningful relationships, with the children, and also with their parents/whānau. The frustrations and the joys of working with two year-olds all centred around the factors that either supported these relationships or got in the way, namely, lack of time, group size, not enough adults on the ground.

Just in the same way that trusting relationships within teaching teams take time to establish, so too did the relationships within this research project. As the

teachers identified they had mixed feelings about being involved in a research project, which put the spotlight on their teaching practices. For the two Dunedin kindergarten teachers who were in relieving positions in their kindergartens, this positioned them in an even more potentially vulnerable position, where they were concerned that any perceived negative interpretation of findings would impact on their employment with the association. Once more the benefit of a two year-study enabled all members of the study - kindergarten teachers in the case study kindergartens, cluster group teachers and observers - to build trusting professional relationships which enabled challenges to be comfortably accepted, and joint problem-solving to be a real possibility.

3. Exploring future possibilities

One of the major tensions within this study was the realisation by the teachers that they could be doing things better, and would like to be able to provide the quality learning environment that they knew the children would benefit from. The teachers felt real frustration knowing that with smaller group sizes, and more trained adults they could provide the kinds of educational and care opportunities that they were trained to do, and that were the most rewarding for themselves and the children. While the teachers involved in this study were able to reflect, reconceptualise, and reframe their work with two year-olds they were not able to directly change the structural factors they worked within. Group sizes, the trained teacher:child ratio, and the ratios of under to over-three year-olds worked against positive experiences for the two year-olds and were sources of the key frustrations in their work.

As the kindergarten associations are faced with the challenge to continue to provide a kindergarten service, this study has important implications for the kinds of decisions that may be made both locally and nationally in regards to kindergartens.

Change within individual kindergartens means that the traditional way of “doing early childhood” is shifting to incorporate practices that currently sit awkwardly with traditional staffing structures. The changes have put new demands on teachers who, from the evidence in our study, are, by and large, responding to the

challenges of their new context with resilience, creativity and determination. At the same time, the current demands stretch the teachers who felt strongly that their current ratios of trained teachers to children were inadequate to allow them to do the job they wanted to do.

At the level of associations, it is clear that policies and strategic directions too are changing and that the direction is towards increasing diversification.

It is possible to hypothesise that the nature of kindergarten teaching in the future will look very different to the models most teachers are currently familiar with.

6. Limitations of the project

Research design and findings

This study has been based on a small number of case study children (18) and in a total of four kindergartens (two in Dunedin, and two in Wellington). While this study makes no attempt to generalise our findings across all kindergartens we can, however, assert that the findings resonate with kindergarten teachers, and kindergarten management across the country.

As we discussed earlier in our report, the way we had designed the study did not eventuate completely as planned, despite the interest and involvement of the teachers and associations.

1. Differences between the Wellington and Dunedin contexts meant that we have been unable to make direct comparison of the results between the two geographical areas as originally anticipated. These differences can be summarised as:
 - age of children (Dunedin 2.0-2.3 years-old; Wellington 2.8-2.10 years-old);
 - number of kindergartens - two in Dunedin for the two years, one different kindergarten each year in Wellington;
 - stability of staff - all staff remained the same in Dunedin, staff changed in Wellington due to using different kindergartens;
 - the cluster group participation - in Dunedin 16 teachers attended all five cluster groups, in Wellington this varied from 12 to 6 for any one meeting.
2. An additional key impact of these differences was that it was only in Dunedin that we were able to build the project over the two years, and thus begin to see outcomes for the goal we had set of seeing teachers' professional practices shift over time. Likewise, while the Dunedin teachers were able to share their involvement in the study with their kindergarten colleagues, this was also not possible in Wellington.

3. The level of involvement from the kindergarten teachers differed significantly from the original design and over the two year-period. The identified reasons for this were:
 - External workload pressures - over the two years the teachers experienced ERO reviews, participation in professional development contracts for assessment and ICT by the case study kindergartens.
 - The decision to remove the reflective journals from Phase Two was based on the perception by the observers that these were a burden for the teachers. While the teachers did find them time consuming, and welcomed their removal at the end of Phase One, by the end of Phase Two the Dunedin teachers realised their usefulness.
 - Concern by senior management that teachers observing each other could impact negatively on professional relationships which led to observers from outside the kindergartens undertaking the case study observations.
4. Due to the focus of our observations being on the case study children, this study does not incorporate a holistic analysis of the kindergarten environment. This would have provided a fuller analysis of the whole centre dynamics within which kindergarten teachers worked. An analysis of this kind would enable a fuller picture of the competing demands on teachers' time that impact on the way teachers apportion their time among different curricular activities.
5. We also would have liked to have undertaken a comparison of the teachers' patterns of interaction with two year-olds and teachers' interactions with older children. This would have required a focus on the teachers' actions during the sessions and we explored the possibility that teachers do observations on each other that would have enabled this analysis. This suggestion did not eventuate due to concerns about relief time in one association.

Recommendations for future research and consideration

1. This research has begun conversations about quality practices in kindergartens. While the focus of the study was on the two year-olds in the kindergarten, the resulting discussions have encouraged teachers to look at the individual and collective well-being of all children in the session. Towards the end of study, teachers in both geographical sites of the study raised the idea that the case study two year-olds be followed up again when they were four years-old so that the implications of beginning kindergarten at such an early age, and having three years at the kindergarten, could be explored.

Teacher: I think it would be lovely to see you come back and look at these children again in a couple of years time.

2. This study has explored teachers' perspectives on their experience and their views of their practice. This has revealed a teaching role that is complex and demanding. It would be important for future research to explore teachers' practices as they are enacted. This will enable a fuller unpacking of the complexity of kindergarten teachers' role.
3. As the kindergarten national survey demonstrated, the context of the kindergartens is no longer homogeneous and given the challenges to continue to be viable as a quality service, it would be useful to systematically research and evaluate the impact of other forms of diversification in addition to the introduction of two year-olds. For a service that was the 'flagship' of early childhood (Davison, 1997) too little is known about the outcomes for children, families and teachers from the changes that associations have implemented over the last 5-10 years.

7. References

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8. Appendices

- Appendix A: Information Sheets
- Appendix B: Letters to parents
- Appendix C: Consent Forms
- Appendix D: Interview Schedules
- Appendix E: Guidelines for Reflective Professional Journal
(2004)
- Appendix F: Homework and Readings for Cluster Groups
Sessions
- Appendix G: Cluster group questionnaire
- Appendix H: National kindergarten association questionnaire
- Appendix I: Report on findings from national kindergarten
association questionnaire