Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

ORIGINAL PAPER

Teachers Facilitating Support for Young Children Experiencing Parental Separation and Divorce

Linda Mahony • Kerryann Walsh • Joanne Lunn • Anne Petriwskyj

_____

L. Mahony ⊠ • K. Walsh • J. Lunn • A. Petriwskyj

Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia, 4059

e-mail: linda.mahony@connect.qut.edu.au

Abstract

This paper reports on a study of Australian early childhood teachers' pedagogical practices with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews and a focus group were conducted to explore the actions of teachers to support young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. A grounded theory approach was used to analyse data. Teachers reported actions that were focussed on constructing emotional, behavioural, and academic support for young children, as well as forming partnerships with parents, school personnel, and community members to assist. Results are discussed in terms of the implications for professional practice.

Keywords   Grounded theory, divorce, pedagogical practice, school, teacher support

Introduction

For many young children, parental separation and divorce is a stressful event that can affect their wellbeing and learning, yet other children are resilient. While there is much research on the effects of separation and divorce on young children in general, there is little research relating to their early school experiences and the actions of teachers working with them. Yet teachers' interactions with children can influence their wellbeing and learning, allowing for the possibility that teachers and schools may assist children to make positive adjustments (Pianta, Hamre & Stuhlman, 2003).

Parental separation and divorce affects a substantial proportion of school-aged children. Recent statistics indicate that divorce rates are relatively consistent across countries in the Western world. In the United States of America, the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) reported that 55% of marriages in 2009 ended in divorce. In the United Kingdom, the Office for National Statistics (2010) reported that 54% of marriages ended in divorce in 2007. Eurostat (2011) reported 44% of marriages ended in divorce across Europe in 2009. In Australia, where this study is located, 42% of marriages ended in divorce in 2010 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2012). While divorce is generally not as prevalent in non-western countries, there is evidence to suggest that divorce rates are increasing in countries such as China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2012) and India (National Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

In Australia, as is the case internationally, the number of children experiencing separation and divorce is higher than the reported figures suggest. The ABS reports only official divorce rates and do not report separations of married or de facto couples. However, official divorce rates are no longer an accurate measure of stability or instability of couple relationships (Gray, Qu, & Western, 2008). Of the divorces in Australia in 2010, 49% involved children under the age of 18 years (ABS, 2012). This rate has remained stable over the past decade. It is estimated that in the 12-month period from mid-2009 to mid-2010, one-in-five children (21%) under the age of 18 years had a biological parent living elsewhere, which amounts to just over one million Australian children. Teachers have daily contact with these young children and are in an ideal position to facilitate support when needed; however, little research investigates this phenomenon. Greater understanding of the nature of interaction between teachers and children to promote their positive adjustment, wellbeing, and learning is needed.

Amato's (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment framework provides a way to understand divorce and its effects on children. In Amato's (2000) framework, parental separation and divorce were acknowledged as

stressful events to which both parents and children make adjustment. Amato (2000) identified parental stress factors to include sole parenting, loss of custody of children, loss of emotional support, on-going conflict with ex-spouse, and economic decline. Amato (2000) identified stress factors experienced by children to include a decline in parental support and discipline, loss of contact with one parent, parental conflict, and economic decline. Within this framework, schools and teachers have a role in promoting adjustment in children. For example, research in the broader field of resilience suggested that positive adjustment is facilitated by increasing bonding between students and caring adults, communicating high expectations for students' academic and social performance, and creating partnerships with families and community resources (Brooks, 2006). Research has also shown influences such as teachers' actions and expectations, school-wide policies, classroom and school climate play a key role in promoting adjustment and fostering positive attitudes toward school (Green, Oswald, & Spears, 2007). While viewing separation and divorce through this framework suggests it is a stressful process, the divorce-stress-adjustment framework also explains the varying responses of individuals. Encompassed in Amato's framework is the encouraging possibility that teachers and or schools may act as protective factors or buffers to the stress factors and promote children's positive adjustment.

Separation and divorce can have short-term and long-term effects on children's wellbeing and learning. Children construct their own reality in response to their parents' separation and divorce. Some children exhibit an array of internalising and/or externalising behaviours (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001; Cheng, Dunn, O'Connor, & Golding, 2006), compromised emotional and behavioural wellbeing (Babalis, Xanthakou, Papa, & Tsolou, 2011; Cheng et al., 2006; Potter, 2010; Ross & Wynne, 2010; Størksen, Thorsen, Øverland, & Brown, 2012; Strohschein, 2005; Vousoura, Verdeli, Warner, Wickramaratne, Baily, & Richard, 2012), as well as poorer academic outcomes (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Steele, Sigle-Rushton, & Kravdal, 2009; Sun & Li, 2011) when compared with children living with both parents. Much research presents children's responses to parental divorce as interpreted by their parents or teachers. Storksen, Thorsen, Overland and Brown (2012), however, reported children's feelings and experiences from children's perspectives. Their findings showed that some children of divorce seem to be well adjusted, some children showed mixed emotions, and some young children showed sadness. Sadness was particularly common for children who comforted their parents. However, not every separation and divorce has adverse repercussions for children. The divorce-stress-adjustment model recognises that individuals have different reactions to divorce (Amato, 2000). Indeed, many children make adequate adjustments and experience minimal ongoing adverse effects (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson 1997; Moxnes, 2003; Winslow, Wolchik, & Sander, 2004). Commentators on parental separation

4

and divorce suggest that modifiable factors such as individual, family, and extra-familial protective influences can contribute to children's positive adjustments to their parents' separation and divorce (Pedro-Carroll, 2005). Individual factors refer to the unique characteristics of children such as temperament, coping skills, and outlook for the future. Family factors that promote positive outcomes include positive family relationships, economic stability, psychological wellbeing of parents, and family support. Extra-familial protective factors include those that are external to the child such as a support network of people, including teachers, family, and friends; a supportive and structured environment; and formal support programs (Pedro-Carroll, 2005).

Teachers are instrumental in forming partnerships with others to assist in constructing support. Studies have revealed that teachers considered communication with parents and other teachers to be important when building positive relationships and working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007). To work effectively, it is important for teachers to understand the individual, family, and extra-familial factors that they are able to act on to promote children's wellbeing and learning in their classrooms.

While there is much research on the effects of separation and divorce on young children in general, there is little research relating to their school experiences and very little research examining what their teachers do to facilitate support for them. Some notable exceptions exist. A series of studies have been conducted in Norwegian day care centres. By elucidating teacher beliefs (Øverland, Thorsen, & Størksen, 2012a), emotions and coping of day care staff (Øverland, Størksen, Bru, & Thorsen, 2012b), and exploring teachers' views regarding their work experiences with children of divorce in day care centres (Øverland, Størksen, & Thorsen, 2013) the researchers identified supportive actions of teachers and teaching assistants. With respect to children's families, some pedagogical practices used by day care staff in Øverland et al.'s (2013) study were respecting their privacy, maintaining open communication between parents and the early childhood setting, developing understanding of their custody arrangement, remaining impartial with parents, and counselling both children and parents. Øverland et al (2012b) identified that some day care staff felt secure in their work performance and coping. Most of the staff who felt secure in their work performance and coping had a professional day care staff education. The study also identified that some day care staff felt insecure in their work performance; most of these did not have a professional day care staff education. This is worrying, because insecure staff tended to withdraw from situations where children or parents express emotions, such as if children express sad emotions or the parents argue in front of the children. This also shows that staff need more education and guidance in their work (Øverland et al., 2012b). These studies showed that teachers worked with young children experiencing

parental divorce in a somewhat non-systematic manner by relying on personal experience to inform their work rather than professional research –based information.

Another small group of qualitative studies has been conducted in North America (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007). These studies were unpublished Masters and Doctoral studies. Cottongim (2002) studied how parents, classroom teachers, and school counsellors viewed the role of the school as a support system for children of divorce. Although teachers' strategies such as allowing the child to express their needs, displaying empathy and patience, providing a secure environment, remaining impartial, being available to talk with or spend time with the child, and giving extra attention featured in the findings, the study was primarily aimed at teasing apart the role of school counsellors and teachers in providing support. Ellington's (2003) study conducted in one Christian School in the USA studied the effects of an 11-week intervention for children of divorce. Teachers were interviewed and provided some insights into what was effective practice. When asked what advice they would provide to other teachers working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce, they offered actions such as being available to listen to students, being consistent in love and discipline, maintaining routine, creating a safe school environment, praying for the family, recommending a counselling service, never taking sides, and being flexible. In Canada King (2007) examined the question of what parents and teachers can do to best support the success of elementary school students affected by divorce. Support and communication emerged as two key themes in this research, more specifically keeping the lines of communication open with both parents. This small body of research suggests that teachers employ particular pedagogical practices when working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

The Norwegian series of studies have been instrumental in identifying some pedagogical practices of day care staff with young children experiencing parental divorce to promote behavioural and emotional wellbeing. However, their studies focussed specifically on day care centres where, in the Australian school context, academic goals are somewhat different than in other early childhood contexts. It focuses on the finer-grained details of what teachers do to facilitate emotional, academic, and behavioural support for children in circumstances of parental separation and divorce—how and why they assemble information in order to decide what action is best under the circumstances. This is important because, as noted above, research shows that some children experiencing parental separation or divorce may display lower behavioural, emotional (Babalis, Xanthakou, Papa, & Tsolou, 2011; Cheng et al., 2006; Potter, 2010; Størksen, Thorsen, Øverland, & Brown, 2012; Strohschein, 2005), and academic outcomes (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Steele, Sigle-Rushton, & Kravdal, 2009; Sun & Li, 2011) when compared with children living in intact families (ABS, 2012). This

present study contributes to the emerging body of knowledge, by examining the support facilitated by teachers of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce specifically to promote their wellbeing and learning. In this study, the term early childhood teachers, are those working with young children between the ages of three and eight years. In the state of Victoria in Australia, this includes children ages three to four years in prior to school settings as well as in the formal years of schooling —five to eight years. Early childhood teachers in the state of Victoria, adhere to the *Victorian early years learning and development framework: Birth to 8 years* (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2013) which makes provision for children aged between birth and eight years.

Method

Participants

Twenty-one teachers (20 female and one male), from various locations in Victoria, Australia participated in semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Participants were selected using purposeful theoretical sampling and a process of snowball sampling whereby participants referred other prospective participants to the research (Warren, 2002; Weiss, 1994). Purposeful theoretical sampling is unique to grounded theory whereby participants are selected according to their suitability to provide knowledge of the phenomenon. As it is classroom teachers who experience this phenomenon directly in their daily contact with children and who have more contact with children than any other professional, they were considered the most appropriate informants for a study of this kind.

Following the interviews, a focus group was conducted with a convenience sample comprising of six participants (five female and one male) recruited from one school district. In the focus group, five participants were new to the study and one participant had been an interview participant. The focus group was conducted in one location. It was not feasible for all interview participants to also attend the focus group as interview participants had been drawn from multiple locations across regional Victoria, some up to 200km from the focus group location. This provided an opportunity to test the credibility of the findings with those who were familiar and unfamiliar with the study. Opening up the analyses to others for peer review helped to safeguard against bias and utilize multiple perspectives in the interpretation of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Peer reviewers also reflected on whether the knowledge gained from the study was authentic in terms of identifying teachers' pedagogical practices with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

Procedure

Interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The focal point of this study is encompassed in questions directed toward teachers' facilitating support for children experiencing these family circumstances. An open-ended grand tour question introduced the topic and began conversation. Teachers were asked to tell about a day or a particular episode they had experienced with a child or children from separated or divorced parents. Guiding questions were prepared ahead of time to clarify what was requested and guide the conversation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hatch, 2002). Guiding questions included "Tell me about any adjustments you have made to your teaching practice" and "What did you do?" Probing questions provided clarification to the grand tour question, and added depth to the interview data by asking the participant to be specific (Berg, 2004; Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hatch, 2002; Warren, 2002). These questions evolved as interviews proceeded, for example: "Tell me more", "Could you explain that more?", "Can you give an example?", "Tell me what you mean" and, "What were you thinking at the time?" (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007; Hatch, 2002). Teachers were not directly asked personal questions such as their age or their personal experience with separation and divorce, however, during the interviews, some participants volunteered details of their personal experiences. Interviewing continued until "theoretical saturation" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 263) had been achieved, i.e., until new information had ceased to emerge from the interviews.

A focus group session was conducted to confirm preliminary findings and as a member checking device to establish initial validity of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking involves the researcher presenting the preliminary findings to participants and their peers to validate the findings (Birks & Mills, 2011). The focus group protocol was developed directly from the results of the study. The focus group session was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher, as moderator for the focus group session, initiated conversation and allowed the discussion to flow naturally. Direct questions or topics to evoke discussion such as "How do you know what to do?" were presented to the focus group to provide catalysts for discussion, as recommended by Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook (2007). Probing questions such as "Can you give an example?" and "Please describe what you mean," were used to encourage discussion and to clarify and extend teachers' comments.

Data Analysis

Corbin and Strauss' (2008) version of grounded theory was used in this study. Unique to grounded theory is concurrent data gathering and analysis. As each interview concluded it was analysed before further

interviews were conducted. Necessary adjustments were made to the interview protocol to ensure future interviews were focused to answer the research questions. Corbin and Strauss' (2008) three stages of coding—open, axial, and selective—were used to analyse the data. Coding was completed manually. During open coding each interview was broken down into separate incidents and compared for similarities and differences and all possible initial codes were listed. In the second stage of coding, axial coding, the initial codes were compared against data from subsequent interviews and data was sorted into codes. The third stage of coding was selective coding whereby codes were systematically reduced and grouped, synthesising data until a central category emerged that described participants' experiences of what they know, think, and do with children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

In addition to the essential elements of grounded theory to analyse data—coding, constant comparative analysis, and researcher memoing—additional data analysis techniques unique to Corbin and Strauss' (2008) version of grounded theory were used. These included researcher diagrams, story line technique, and applying the conditional/consequential matrix. Corbin and Strauss's (2008) story line technique aided the construction and integration of the final theory that explained the actions of early childhood teachers with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. This included diagramming to assist with the integration of categories (Figure 1 is a product of this process); and the conditional/consequential matrix (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 90-95). Applying the conditional/consequential matrix brings broader structural considerations into the analysis giving insight into the phenomenon. In this study, this involved giving consideration to broader conditions that facilitate or interrupt teachers' work such as educational policy which, in this study, was reported by teachers to be inadequate.

Results

Analysis of the data showed that teachers engaged in a range of strategies to construct emotional, academic, and behavioural support to accommodate young children's personal characteristics and family circumstances. Teachers also formed partnerships with parents, school personnel, and community members and organisations to make accommodations for young children. Figure 1 is a pictorial representation of the support constructed by teachers in this study and the partnerships they formed with others to assist them in constructing support. Excerpts from the interview transcripts are included to exemplify the actions of teachers. These properties will now be elaborated.

Teachers facilitating support for young children
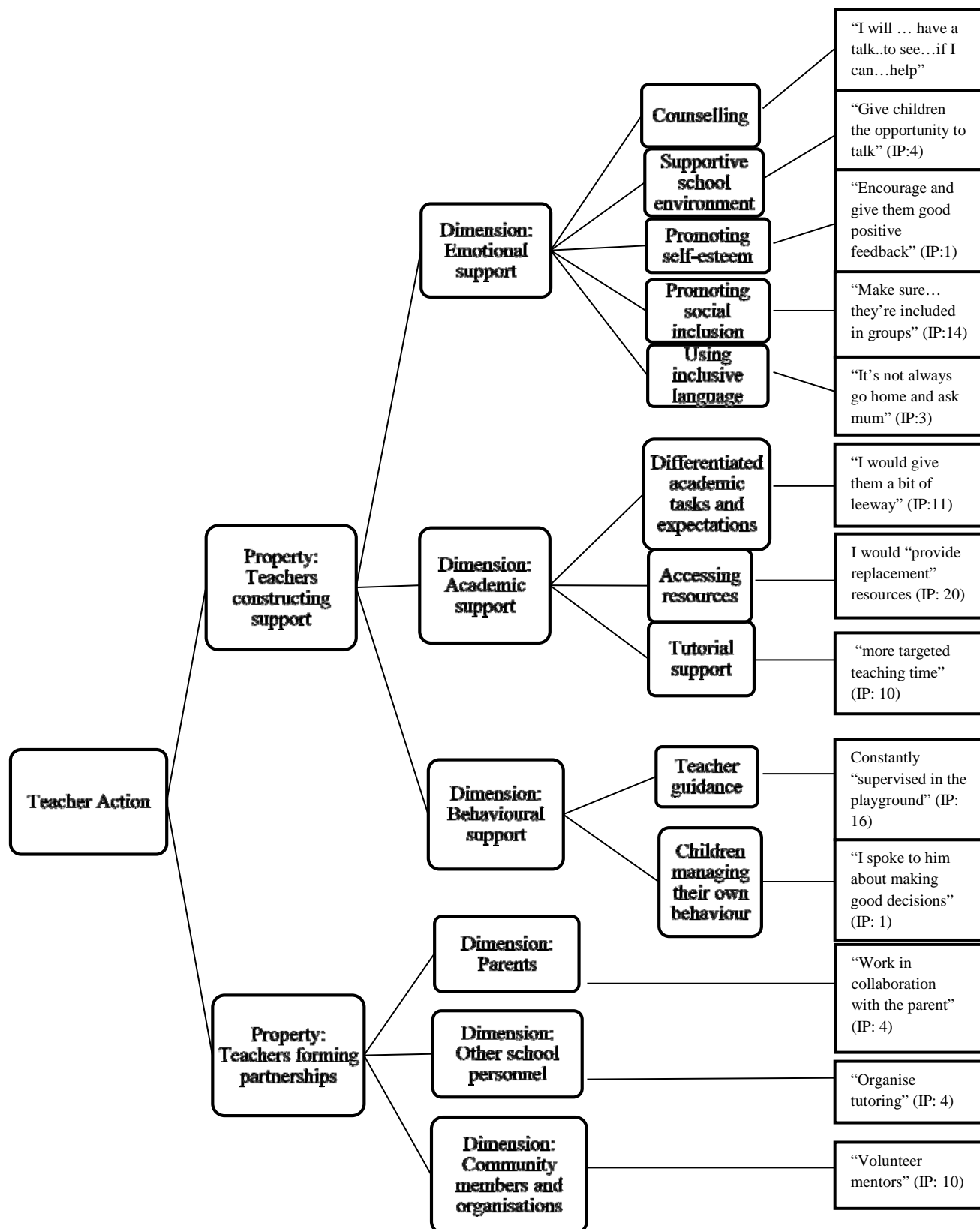
Fig. 1 Teacher action and its properties and dimensions. Properties define the components of the category. Dimensions describe the variations of a property (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Adapted from "Mahony, 2013" p. 192

Teachers Constructing Support

Teachers constructed emotional, academic, and behavioural support for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Support provided was dependent on the needs of individual children and their family circumstance as perceived by their teachers through observations and interactions with children, their families, and school and community members. Construction of support for the emotional needs of individual children included providing some children counselling, a supportive environment, promoting their self-esteem and a sense of emotional security. Support constructed for the academic needs of children included providing children with differentiated tasks and expectations, access to resources, tutorial support, and teachers using inclusive language. Support for behavioural needs included giving children opportunities to regulate their own behaviour as well as teachers intervening to provide behavioural guidance.

Emotional support. The overwhelming majority of teachers (20 out of 21, 95%) spoke about constructing emotional support for young children. They suggested that constructing such support for young children took priority over academic work, as an anxious, stressed child may experience difficulty learning. In the following excerpt, this teacher explained, in these instances, that she would change approach, to make young children feel safe and secure.

> I don't think they can learn particularly. I think a highly anxious child that is worried about things; I don't think they really take it in. Then you've really got to change tack with them and...try and make them feel safe and secure and happy at school and almost forget about the learning or pushing them too much there (Interview Participant [IP]: 14).

Constructing emotional support for young children included providing counselling, providing a supportive environment, promoting self-esteem, social inclusion, and using inclusive language. The majority of teachers (16 out of 21, 76%) spoke of engaging in incidental counselling sessions with young children about their family circumstance. Teachers referred to these counselling sessions as having talks with children "on a one-to-one" (IP: 7) basis. One teacher revealed that, during these private conversations, she may ask, "Is everything okay at home?" (IP: 7). Another teacher spoke about needing to be "a good listener and to be reassuring and to assist them through the difficulties that they have" (IP: 5).

Many teachers (14 out of 21, 67%) spoke about creating a supportive school environment. They suggested that creating a supportive environment was an ongoing activity, as opposed to a once-off action. Teachers spoke about openness: "Creating that sort of community environment where children aren't feeling

fearful of telling you something private" (IP: 4). They described schools as places where children can feel safe and secure to confide in their teacher at times when they needed emotional support. Teachers promoted safety and security by creating and maintaining positive relationships with children and their parents through open communication, as well as the maintenance of consistency with routines, rules, and expectations.

Some teachers (7 out of 21, 33%) spoke about "boosting [young children's] confidence and self-esteem" (IP: 15) as a form of emotional support. One teacher said, you've got to help them "to feel special, to increase their self-esteem" (IP: 2) and improve a sense of self-worth. This teacher explained that she would "go through the roll and give everybody a turn, but I'd probably give him a couple more than the others" (IP: 2). Other teachers provided explicit teaching episodes to support young children's emotional wellbeing.

Another action of teachers when constructing emotional support was the promotion of social inclusion. Some teachers (5 out of 21, 24%) spoke about providing additional experiences and intervening to support young children select supportive peers, monitoring peer group acceptance, and maintain positive peer interactions. One teacher spoke about guiding children towards groups of children whom she thought would be supportive and could be a positive influence. She explained, "I try and steer him towards the kids who'll keep him in their group" (IP: 13). Other teachers spoke about monitoring young children to ensure that they were included in social groups, both in the classroom and during outdoor playtime.

Some teachers (5 out of 21, 24%) spoke of being conscious of the need to use inclusive language. The teacher in the following excerpt showed that he was aware of the variety of family constellations for the children in his class. He said that he would be "sympathetic to situations…that may disadvantage…or highlight the fact that they haven't got a parent who can come along" (IP: 5) to events at school. In one instance he spoke about planning "a father's day breakfast, but we didn't call it a father's day breakfast, we called it a big men's breakfast" (IP: 5). Another participant spoke about introducing fathers' day activities as "someone special, maybe grandpa" (IP: 11).

Academic support. An overwhelming majority of teachers (19 out of 21, 90%) talked about constructing academic support for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. They spoke about differentiating academic tasks and expectations, providing access to resources, and making provision for tutorial support.

Many teachers (12 out of 21, 57%) spoke of differentiating their teaching designing specific activities and modifying expectations to make accommodations for particular children. One teacher spoke about

identifying specific objectives and modified tasks for particular children. She provided an activity to address the objective and then "directed children to those activities...if I've got a specific objective that I want to follow through" (IP: 8). Teachers spoke about having different academic expectations for particular children. One teacher said that, at times, she has avoided "insisting a piece of work be done" (IP: 17) by particular children. While some teachers modified their expectations for particular children, one teacher, however, made the point that she would "still expect them to get some work done and not just give them a free pass because of stuff that's going on at home" (IP: 11), thus maintaining parity with her usual class expectations.

Some teachers (8 out of 21, 38%) spoke about providing access to resources to ensure young children were not excluded from educational activities because of their family circumstances. Two schools had a welfare budget to purchase breakfast or lunch items. The school welfare budget could also be used to help families financially, for example, with payment for school camps, again facilitating student inclusion. Teachers ensured young children were not disadvantaged by not having resources needed for school. Teachers provided replacements when children misplaced resources when moving between separate parental homes. One teacher explained when a child had left their home reading book at home that she would allow the child to "choose a book from somewhere else to read" on that day (IP: 6).

Some teachers (5 out of 21, 24%) spoke of providing tutorial support to children. One teacher suggested that she was aware that home reading was not occurring for a child who lived between two households. In this instance, the teacher made specific individual provision for the child to "read at school that day" (IP: 14) to ensure the child did not miss out on this important learning. Another teacher spoke about having young children practice their reading with her before school began or at other times of the day: "[the child] comes in before school and I'll help her. When we do reading...I try to listen to them all every day" (IP: 21).

Behavioural support. A third form of support that teachers construct for children is behavioural support. Many teachers (8 out of 21, 38%) mentioned intervening to correct children's behaviour. Inappropriate behaviour included children displaying externalizing behaviours such as children fighting with other children in the yard, and being disruptive and disobedient with their teachers. Some teachers (3 out of 21, 14%) spoke about providing guidance to children with managing their behaviour. Behavioural support was individualised to make accommodations for the personal characteristics and family circumstances of young children.

Teachers referred to some children being constantly "supervised in the playground" (IP: 16), with the aim of avoiding an incident. With one specific child, another teacher explained that a teacher needed:

To be with him all the time out in the yard. He can't play on his own. We have a passive play area that we've set up for some children who can't behave socially acceptable in the yards...He goes into that area sometimes, or he walks around with the yard duty teacher sometimes, just to keep an eye on him (IP: 12).

The teacher in the above excerpt, however, was also critical of this approach. She suggested that interventions such as these were put into place to protect other children but had little benefit for children experiencing difficulty to self regulate their behaviour. She stated emphatically, "it's not fixing anything. It's just really stopping anything from happening. It's not changing his behaviour" (IP: 12).

Teachers spoke of talking calmly with young children about their inappropriate behaviour. This teacher explained how she would "bring them in [from the playground], calm them, just try and be as normal as possible. You just always talk to them" (IP: 19). Another teacher also spoke about talking with children about their behaviour, and providing encouragement and skills for children to regulate their own behaviour when confronted with situations.

Teachers also provided explicit scaffolding for children to regulate their own behaviour. In the following excerpt, the teacher encouraged this young child to problem solve and make choices to modify their behaviour. She talked about creating "leeway" with behavioural expectations and providing the child with a range of options from which to choose. She explained:

Sometimes I'll say to them, how do you think we can fix this problem? They might choose...perhaps [to] sit by themselves for a little while...They might actually sit with a different child that they're not going to talk to as much...we might arrange a time where you've got so much time where you can talk while you're working and now we'll have some quiet time...So you give them a bit of leeway and give them some options because each child is quite different (IP: 6).

Teachers Forming Partnerships

While teachers took independent action when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, they also spoke about forming partnerships with parents, other school personnel, and community members when constructing support for young children. The type and role of partnerships teachers formed depended on children's individual characteristics and family circumstances.

Many teachers (10 out of 21, 48%) spoke of forming partnerships with parents in order to develop understandings that informed pedagogical decisions. Teachers revealed that often young children's inappropriate behaviour in the classroom prompted them to make contact with parents. In the following

excerpts, these teachers explained that they collaborated with parents to determine what the cause of their concern was. One teacher explained, "If...all of a sudden... [the teacher notices] changes in behaviour...that's when you would get the parents in...to try to pinpoint if there is an issue" (IP: 4). This teacher spoke of how collaborating with parents gave her additional insights, thus informing her pedagogical practice and work towards a solution to the problem:

> I'll ring the mum straight away and just...say...he's been involved in some play at playtime that wasn't appropriate...I just said...what's going on basically because we really need to know at the school, so we could make allowances at school for different behaviours and, sort of, counsel (IP: 10).

Teachers also spoke of instances when they showed discretion in raising sensitive behavioural matters with parents. In these instances, teachers appeared to have been aware of extreme distress of parents and were conscious not to add to this distress. Teachers spoke of managing issues at school in order to protect parents. For example, one teacher said, "We'll put off ringing the mother and things like that. We'll deal with it a little bit more in-house as opposed to ringing home" (IP: 9).

Some teachers (4 out of 21, 19%) spoke of forming partnerships with other school personnel to provide additional emotional, academic, and behavioural support for young children and their parents. Teachers spoke about referring young children to professional psychologists or the school welfare teacher, and accessing teacher aides to provide emotional support. Teachers referred children to other school personnel for academic tutoring. One teacher spoke of how she would "organise tutoring... if parents aren't up to getting homework tasks done" (IP: 4). Other teachers highlighted the roles of specialist school personnel, peers, older children, and professional academic tutors in the provision of academic support. Teachers also spoke of collaborating with colleagues to provide behavioural intervention as well as encouraging children to regulate their behaviour.

Teachers established partnerships with community organisations (4 out of 21, 19%) to access external sources of support for parents and children. In these instances, teachers offered support to parents and linked them to counselling support services. One teacher explained that she had "offer[ed] the parents assistance [and] we have recommended counselling" (IP: 4). One teacher talked about enlisting volunteers from the community to provide individual attention for young children. She explained that one child "had a mentor all year that she meets up with for an hour every week. That mentor chats, talks, plays games, makes things, and makes a special effort with her" (IP: 10). Other teachers spoke about community volunteers reading with young children to provide emotional and academic support. One teacher explained that "it was really just about the attention for

the kid and they knew there was going to be no one at home to read to anyway" (Focus Group Participant [FGP]: 2). Other teachers referred to particular groups of community volunteers such as the "grandma group" (FGP: 2) or "book mates" (FGP: 3).

Teachers recalled instances when community organisations provided funding for the school to support children in special events such as camps as the following excerpt attests:

> We've had a summer camp...the Lions Club might come along and say we've got some funds for this camp and you can target children and they might be in those situations...and they need perhaps that opportunity, so you might recommend that student in that situation, [they] might benefit more (IP: 5).

Participant teachers formed partnerships with parents and to a lesser extent, school personnel and community members and organisations when making accommodations for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The type and role of partnerships teachers formed depended on children's individual characteristics and family circumstances.

Discussion

The important role of teachers in facilitating positive adjustment of children experiencing parental separation or divorce is highlighted in the findings of this study. Teachers have facilitated support for young children to promote their emotional, academic, and behavioural progress. Teachers constructed support themselves as well as forming partnerships with parents, school personnel, and community members and organisations to assist them in the provision of effective support. Scholars who apply Amato's (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment framework recognise that parental separation and divorce can be a stressful event for children and their families. Through this framework protective factors are promoted to buffer the stress factors for children and their families to enable them to make a positive adjustment to their changed family circumstances. Applying Amato's (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment framework highlights the social and interconnecting influence of the actions of teachers, schools, and wider community on young children's social, emotional, and academic wellbeing and learning.

Applying Corbin and Strauss's (2008) conditional/consequential matrix (pp. 90-95), the circumstances surrounding children's parents' separation and divorce are referred to as the "conditions" (p. 93) that contribute to the experiences of children. Through Amato's (2000) framework, the actions of teachers are promoted to buffer the stress experienced for children as a result of separation and divorce, and facilitate positive adjustment of children to their changed family circumstances. The actions of teachers to promote children's positive

adjustment provide the link between what Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to as conditions and consequences (p. 93). These are the actions of teachers themselves, or the result of teachers' partnerships with others to assist in constructing support, facilitating support networks of friends and family, providing a supportive and structured school environment, and providing access to formal support programs. The adjustment of children can be viewed as possibly resulting from teachers' actions, which Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to as "consequences" (pp. 90 – 95).

Pedro-Carroll (2005), who studied the effectiveness of preventative interventions for children of divorce, proposes multiple individual child, intra-familial, and extra-familial factors are at play in shaping children's risk and resilience. Teachers form part of an extra-familial network of people which also includes family and friends, supportive and structured environments, and formal support programs contributing to the potential for children to make positive adjustment to their parent's separation and divorce. This study has shown that teachers' actions built on existing protective factors to promote adequate adjustment of children to their parents' separation and divorce.

While teachers facilitated a range of support for young children, they suggested that emotional support for young children was their first priority and that children needed to feel emotionally secure before they could learn. This finding supports previous studies showing that teachers' actions focussed on facilitating emotional support (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013), highlighting the important role of attentive teachers and supportive schools. Participants in these prior studies spoke of similar actions to those identified in this present study—teachers providing counselling for children and parents themselves or referring them to colleagues highlighting the importance of forming partnerships to assist the construction of support (Cottongim, 2002; King, 2007; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013); constructing a supportive environment by fostering positive caring relationships with children and parents (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013), maintaining open communication (Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013), and teachers maintaining a controlled and predictable environment with consistent yet flexible routines, rules and expectations (Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013). Participants used inclusive language when talking about families (Cottongim, 2002). The current study expanded on such support; teachers formed partnerships with community volunteers to assist the construction of support; promoted children's self-esteem by providing encouragement, positive reinforcement, giving children special jobs, and

focussing teaching; and promoted social inclusion by intervening with selection of supportive peers and assisting children to maintaining supportive peer groups.

During times of family change, teachers in this current study noticed the emotional upheaval for particular children, but did not place an emphasis on academic achievement. While they acknowledged it was preferable for children to continue to make academic progress, they realised children may not make academic progress until they had begun to make some positive adjustments to their changed family situation. Like the teachers in this present study, teachers in these previous studies also exercised some leniency by allowing extra time to complete work and modifying expectations (Ellington, 2003; King, 2007) and provided tutorial support for children (Ellington, 2003). In addition, in this current study teachers differentiated academic tasks and expectations by providing specific tasks; provided access to resources by accessing the schools welfare budget and donations from community groups for use for particular children and their families, and replaced resources. Teachers facilitated tutorial support from peers, older students, community volunteers, and professional tutors, highlighting the important partnerships formed to assist in the construction of support for children.

Another type of support that teachers constructed for children in this study was behavioural support. Teachers in this study revealed that they provided opportunities for children to regulate their own behaviour, as well as teachers providing guidance to correct inappropriate behaviour. This finding builds on to existing research (Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013). Findings showed that teachers provided guidance to children by providing close supervision, counselling and correcting behaviour by encouraging and supporting children to regulate their behaviour, being lenient yet maintaining consistency with rules, and collaborating with parents to guide children's behaviour and encourage children to regulate their behaviour.

Facilitating support to promote young children's emotional, academic, and behavioural wellbeing and learning appeared to be teachers' purpose for action. Table 1 provides a summary of the range of pedagogical techniques that have been identified in previous research with teachers working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. This table categorises teacher actions in three key support domains: emotional, academic, and behavioural support. It draws together the collective findings derived from existing research (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013) and shows how the present study confirms and extends these studies by revealing the finer grained pedagogical practices reported by teachers to be part of their everyday work with these children. It is important to note that previous studies conducted by Cottongim (2002), Ellington (2003) and King (2007)

were unpublished doctoral and masters theses that have not been widely disseminated, nor have they had the opportunity to influence policy and practice in the way that published studies may. Including them in this table is a deliberate strategy to ensure these findings, derived from rich in depth studies, are available for consideration. Other findings (Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013) were part of larger studies with broader foci, of which the experiences of children experiencing parental separation and divorce was a small yet important incidental component. Few prior studies intended to take a holistic look at school experiences of these children. However, taken together, these findings, including those of the present study, provide substantial evidence of the actions of teachers when working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The present study is the first study in Australia to specifically explore the actions of teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

In Table 1, pedagogical practices are framed according to the properties and dimensions that emerged from the data of this present study. The properties revolve around teachers facilitating support for young children—emotional, academic, and behavioural. The dimensions of each of these properties provide clues to specific actions teachers can use to construct support and the partnerships they can nurture with others to assist them in constructing support. The practices depicted in Table 1 allow for the notion of modifiable protective factors (Pedro-Carroll, 2005) that teachers can influence, such as considering the unique characteristics of children, promoting their resilience and coping skills, and encouraging a realistic and positive outlook to their family situation. Modifiable family factors can be supported, such as providing financial support, enabling access to school resources, and collaborating with parents. These concrete actions can assist in promoting positive family relationships. Various support networks such as family, friends, other teachers, school, and community organisations may assist teachers in constructing partnerships to build support around young children. In future studies, the actions summarised in Table 1 may provide a framework for confirmatory replication studies, and/or larger scale cross sectional surveys in which key action variables could be operationalised.

Table 1

Pedagogical Practices of Teachers Working with Young Children Experiencing Parental Separation and Divorce. Adapted from "Mahony, 2013" p. 269

Emotional Support	Academic Support	Behavioural support

• Counselling for children and parents
  o Teacher (Mahony, 2013; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013)
  o Colleagues – psychologist, welfare teacher, teacher aides (Cottongim, 2002; King, 2007; Mahony, 2013; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2013)
  o Community volunteers (Mahony, 2013)
	• Differentiated academic tasks and expectations
	  o Leniency with time and expectations (Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Mahony, 2013)
	  o Providing specific tasks (Mahony, 2013)
		• Teacher guidance (Mahony, 2013; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013)
		  o Close supervision
		  o Counselling behaviour
		  o Correcting behaviour
		  o Leniency
		  o Consistent rules
		  o Collaborate with parents

• Supportive environment
  o Positive caring relationships with children and parents (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Mahony, 2013; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013)
  o Open communication with children and parents (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Mahony, 2013; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013)
  o Consistent routines, rules and expectations (Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Mahony, 2013; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013)
  o Leniency (Ellington, 2003; Mahony, 2013; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013)
	• Accessing resources (Mahony, 2013)
	  o Welfare budget - food, camps, excursions
	  o Replacing resources
	  o Donations from community groups
		• Self regulation of behaviour (Mahony, 2013; Øverland et al., 2012b; Øverland et al., 2013)
		  o Provide choices
		  o Support and encourage
		  o Collaborate with parents

Despite identifying a list of successful pedagogical practices of teachers working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce, it is perhaps timely to caution that teachers should not simply apply them without first developing their understanding of the unique characteristics of children and their particular family circumstances. Rather, teachers' decision-making with regards to children and families experiencing parental separation and divorce is a sophisticated contextualised process (Mahony, 2013). Teachers in this study identified the value of personalising pedagogical practices to fit the specific child and family response and circumstance.

The findings from this study provide a starting point for further research into the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Further research could explore parents and children's perspectives with regards to their school experiences, and the influence of teachers' experience with separation and divorce on their pedagogical practice. Professional development could identify and highlight to teachers the support services available in schools and the wider community, and how teachers and parents can access these resources and services.

References

Amato, P. R. (2000). The consequence of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*, 1269-1287. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01269.x

Amato, P. R. (2001). Children of divorce in the 1990s: An update of the Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology, 15*, 355-370. doi: 10.1037/0893-3200.15.3.355

Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. K. (1991). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 110*, 26-46. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.110.1.26

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2012). *Australian social trends (cat. No. 4102.0).*

Babalis, T., Xanthakou, Y., Papa, C., & Tsolou, O. (2011). Preschool age children, divorce, and adjustment: A case study in Greek kindergarten. *Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology, 9*, 1696-2095.

Berg, B. L. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Birks, M., & Mills, J. (2011). *Grounded theory: A practical guide*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Bogdan, R., & Knopp-Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

Brooks, J. E. (2006). Strengthening resilience in children and youths: Maximizing opportunities through the schools. *Children & Schools, 28*, 69-76.

Cheng, H., Dunn, J., O'Connor, T. G., Golding, J., (& ALSPAC Study Team). (2006). Factors moderating children's adjustment to parental separation: Findings from a community study in England. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 34*, 239-241. doi: 10.1007/s10802-005-9013-8

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cottongim, C. M. (2002). *The school's role as a support system for children of parental divorce* (Doctoral Dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Database. (UMI No. 3083420)

Ellington, C. A. (2003). *Effects of divorce on children and ways schools can offer support*. (Master's thesis). Available from ProQuest Dissertaions and Theses database. (UMI No. 1413967)

Eurostat. (2011). *Marriage and divorce statistics*.

Gray, M., Qu, L., & Western, R. (2008). *Fertility and family policy in Australia: Research paper no. 41*. Melbourne, Vic: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Green, D., Oswald, M., & Spears, B. (2007). Teachers' (mis)understandings of resilience. *International Education Journal, 8*, 133-144.

Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Kelly, J. B, & Emery, R. E. (2003). Children's adjustment following divorce: Risk and resilience perspectives. *Family Relations, 52*, 352-362. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00352.x.

King, S. (2007). *A sampling of responses to what parents and teachers can do to best support elementary students affected by divorce* (Master's thesis). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. MR20645)

Lamb, M. E., Sternberg, K. J., & Thompson, R. A. (1997). The effects of divorce and custody arrangements on children's behaviour, development, and adjustment. *Family Court Review, 35*, 393-404. doi: 10.1111/j.174-1617.1997.tb00482.x.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Mahony, L. (2013). *Early childhood teachers' pedagogical practices: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.

Moxnes, K. (2003). Risk factors in divorce: Perceptions by the children involved. *Childhood, 10*, 131-146. doi: 10.1177/0907568203010002002.

National Bureau of Statistics (2012). *Seychelles in figures.*

National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2012). *China Statistical Yearbook 2012. 3-12 Population by Sex, Marital Status and Region (2011).* China Statistics Press.

Office for National Statistics. (2010). *Marriage, Divorce, and Adoption Statistics, England and Wales (Series FM2) - No. 35, 2007*. (35).

Øverland, K., Størksen, I., Bru, E., & Thorsen, A. A. (2012b). Daycare staff emotions and coping related to children of divorce: A Q Methodological Study. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 182*, 1-23. doi: 10.1080/00313831.2012.732606

Øverland, K., Størksen, I., & Thorsen, A. A. (2013). Daycare children of divorce and their helpers. *International Journal of Early Childood, 45*, 51-75. doi: 10.1007/s13158-012-0065-y.

Øverland, K., Thorsen, A. A., & Størksen, I. (2012a). The beliefs of teachers and daycare staff regarding children of divorce: A Q methodological study. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 28*, 312-323. doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2011.10.010.

Pedro-Carroll, J. L. (2005). Fostering resilience in the aftermath of divorce: The role of evidence-based programs for children. *Family Court Review, 43,* 52-64.

Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., & Stuhlman, M. (2003). Relationships between teachers and children. In B. I. Weiner (Ed.), *Handbook of psychology: Vol. 7.* (pp. 199-234). doi: 10.1002/0471264385.wei0710

Potter, D. (2010). Psychosocial well-being and the relationship between divorce and children's academic achievement. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 72*, 933-946. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00740.x

Ross, L. T., & Wynne, S. (2010). Parental depression and divorce and adult children's well-being: The role of family unpredictability. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 19*, 757-761. doi: 10.1007/s10826-010-9366-7

Steele, F., Sigle-Rushton, W., & Kravdal, Ø. (2009). Consequences of family disruption on children's educational outcomes in Norway. *Demography, 46*, 553-574. doi: 10.1353/dem.0.0063.

Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N., & Rook, D. W. (2007). *Focus groups: Theory and practice* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Størksen, I., Thorsen, A. A., Øverland, K., & Brown, S. R. (2012). Experiences of daycare children of divorce. *Early Child Development and Care, 182*, 807-825. doi: 10.1080/03004430.2011.585238.

Strohschein, L. (2005). Parental divorce and child mental health trajectories. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*, 1286-1300. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2005.00217.x.

Sun, Y., & Li, Y. (2011). Effects of family structure type and stability on children's academic performance trajectories. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 73*, 541-556.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2012). *Births, deaths, marriages, and divorces*.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. (2013). *Victorian early years learning and development Framework: Birth to 8 years (Victorian Framework.*

Vousoura, E., Verdeli, H., Warner, V., Wickramaratne, P., Baily, C. D., & Richard. (2012). Parental divorce, familial risk for depression, and psychopathology in offspring: A three-generation study. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 21*, 718-725. doi: 10.1007/s10826-011-9523-7

Warren, C. A. B. (2002). Qualitative interviewing. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 83-102). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learningfrom strangers: The art of method of qualitative interview studies.* New York: Free Press.

Winslow, E. B., Wolchik, S. A., & Sander, I. (2004). Preventive interventions for children of divorce. *Psychiatric Times, 21*, 45-48.