Children, communities and social capital: New ways of thinking about early childhood service provision

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ABSTRACT

Accumulating evidence confirms wide-ranging benefits of effective services for young children and families, along with longer-term social and economic benefits for communities. While a strong theoretical case has recently emerged for the development of responsive and integrated child and family services to build social capital and community capacity, there is scant Australian research to inform and support the process. Furthermore, research in this area has largely overlooked the views of children.

This paper reports on data collected from young children in rural and suburban Queensland schools. 138 children aged four to eight years of age were asked, in informal conversations with their teachers, a series of questions reflecting six social capital dimensions. These dimensions were participation in local community, family and friend's connections, neighbourhood connections, feelings of trust and safety, proactivity in a social context, and tolerance of diversity. In addition, children were asked to comment on their positive and negative experiences of school, to consider possible advice they might give to newcomers and to reflect on why they attended school. Theoretical perspectives from social capital and the sociology of childhood are used to examine children's responses.

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, accumulating evidence highlights the importance of effective early care and education services for child and family wellbeing[1][2][3]. In Australia, however, there is dissatisfaction among families with service systems that are fragmented, single-purpose and non-flexible.[4][5][6] The evidence reported in this paper is drawn from a larger corpus of data collected to investigate the impact in Queensland of newly established *Child Care and Family Support Hubs* in rural and outer metropolitan communities where service provision is particularly challenging.

Child Care and Family Support Hubs[•] have the potential to be a panacea for responsive human services that are better tuned to local community interests and needs. However, research that independently appraises Hub development and outcomes, with a view of establishing models of integration and measures of effectiveness, is not part of the routine government activity surrounding the Hubs. The multi-disciplinary, cross-sectoral team in this study[*] formed to undertake such an appraisal following preliminary pilot work in an inner-urban district of Brisbane.

The need for Hubs stemmed from research indicating that the traditional non-flexible, single purpose services are found to be ineffective for a number of reasons. First, these services have been found to be out-of-touch with the needs of contemporary families because the health, care and education services provided are seen as irrelevant, inappropriate, fragmented or constraining.[4][5][6]

Second, lack of access to services for families in rural Australia is problematic, particularly for those at lower income education and health levels[8][9]and for those with high rates of welfare dependency.[7] This can reduce families' opportunities to receive information and social support that may reduce parental uncertainty and anxiety.[10] Third, increased rates of

mortality[11] have been associated with levels of health and wellbeing of individuals as a result of a lack of support and social access to family, friends, workmates, the family doctor, community nurse or community organisations. The larger study addresses the issues of health, care and education needs of contemporary families in rural and regional areas in relation to service access and social support. The work reported here, a sub-set of the study, addresses the views of the children about their communities and the services in which they participate.

Service integration

Following overseas trends, government departments in Australia are looking to service integration as a way of ensuring better access to and delivery of services to all sectors of the population[4][5][6]. In the UK, service integration is central to current child and family service initiatives where numerous Early Excellence Centres (EECs) were established to *develop and promote models of high quality, integrated early years services for young children and families* through *raising educational standards, increasing opportunities, supporting families, reducing social exclusion, increasing the health of the nation and reducing child poverty*[12]. Initial positive outcomes associated with the EECs include enhanced cognitive development, dispositions to learn, social development, health and reduction of risk among children, improved parenting skills, confidence and quality of life for parents, increased skills and professionalism of EEC staff and regeneration of communities[12]. Integral to the success of the EECs is strong leadership of centre staff. Extensive research in Canada and the United States also highlights positive outcomes for children resulting from access to and involvement in a range of integrated community services[13][14].

Social capital and sense of community

Underpinning current government policies and moves towards service integration is a growing commitment to strengthening communities through building family and community social capital and a sense of community. Social capital[15] has been identified as one of five key family resources used to gauge social and family wellbeing and functioning as well as being linked to a range of positive health, education and other outcomes[16][17][18][19]. With regard to children and youth, research indicates that social capital can help to overcome disadvantage and is instrumental in school retention and general wellbeing[20][21].

Related to social capital, sense of community refers to the feeling of belonging to a group[22]. The absence of sense of community has been found to engender feelings of alienation, isolation and loneliness[23]. On the other hand, a strong sense of community has been linked to a range of positive outcomes for adults including improved wellbeing and happiness. Positive outcomes for adolescents include performance gains at school, higher rates of school retention, lower incidences of loneliness and reduced criminal behaviour[24][25][26]. One of the few studies that investigated sense of community among children at school (aged 8-12), found correlations with increased school performance, pro-social development and personal wellbeing [27].

The status of children in this research

Despite the obvious impact of services on children, young children's views of service provision are rarely heard. According to Woodhead and Faulkner[28], *significant knowledge gain results when children's active participation in the research is deliberately solicited and when their perspectives, views and feelings are accepted as genuine, valid evidence* (p. 31). Yet, with the exception of studies as early as 1989 by Armstrong and Sugawara[29], and more recently by Farrell, Tayler, Tennent and Gahan[30], Sheridan and Samuelson[31], and Evans and Fuller[32], investigations of young children's perceptions of the services they attend have been limited.

A distinguishing feature of this research program is that the researchers listened to children - not just to their parents and service providers. Children's sites of experience[33], in which children are seen as competent informants on their own lives[34], acknowledges the human rights of children to participation in relevant social processes.[35]

Information on a range of issues was gathered from children as they participated in audio-taped conversations with a researcher. These adult-child conversations provided a basis for considering what children themselves view as important in their everyday lives and for framing policies appropriate for children in order to *address* directly *children's interests, rather than, simply, adults' interests*[36]. Conversations were structured around the *Children's Social Capital Survey*[37] an eight-item survey that asks about involvement in clubs or groups, contact with neighbours, friends, or relatives, trust in people, pro-social behaviours, and feelings of safety in their area;

It is not surprising that children's accounts of their own experience in these services vary from those of their parents, given the situated character of their understandings of experience and the notion that children inhabit a universe that is "phenomenologically distinct" (p.224)[38] from that of their parents.

Importantly too, while the researchers recognize the salience of children's changing competence over time[39] and the systematized assignment of gendered roles[40, 41] this paper avoids the "disciplinary singularity" (p. 31)[28] associated with selecting either developmental or gender frames to analyze this corpus of child data. Rather, we use, in broad terms, the wide-angle lens of the sociology of childhood[42, 36, 43] to examine the child data.

METHODOLOGY

Preliminary visits to the hub sites were conducted by the QUT research team in order to meet the hub coordinator and local service providers, to discuss the project, build support and initiate recruitment of participants. Follow-up visits were made to distribute fliers about the project, survey questionnaires and to oversee and assist with collection of all data sets.

Consent in writing was obtained from children's parents and/or caregivers and informed voluntary consent was obtained from each child prior to being interviewed. Responses from children's social capital questions were tabulated to provide frequency statistics.

Individually and in small groups, children were asked a series of eight questions adapted from the Onyx and Bullen[44] Social Capital measure. These questions reflected the following dimensions of social capital:

- participation in community activities
- neighbourhood connections
- family and friends connections
- proactivity in a social context
- feelings of trust and safety
- tolerance of diversity

In addition, children were asked to comment on their positive and negative experiences of school, to consider possible advice they might give to newcomers and to reflect on why they attended school.

FINDINGS

Social Capital

Table 1 shows the questions that children were asked and the percentage of children from the rural and the urban community who answered yes to each question. As can be seen in the table, there were several differences in responses across the groups.

For instance, more than twice as many urban children compared to rural children indicated that they were members of clubs or groups. This finding undoubtedly reflects the lack of clubs and facilities available in the rural area. Likewise, fewer rural than urban children indicated that they visited friends, relatives or neighbours very often, probably due to the distances involved. A number of children in the rural community, for instance, indicated that they did not have any neighbours, and that friends and relatives lived some distance away. Two unexpected differences in the children's responses related to helping others with homework and enjoyment of being with those who were different to them. Rural children were marginally less likely to agree that they would help a friend with schoolwork (these children explained that this would be *'cheating'*) and substantially less likely to agree that they like being with people who were different from them.

Agreement among children from both communities was most pronounced in relation to picking up rubbish in the playground and feeling safe in their area. Nearly all children agreed that they would pick up any rubbish and that they felt safe where they lived.

Table 1. Responses to Social Capital Items According to Locality

	Rural *n*= 42	Urban *n*= 96
Are you in any clubs or groups?	17%	36%
Do you visit friends or relatives very often?	67%	77%
Do you get to visit neighbours very often?	50%	60%
Do you trust most people?	62%	68%
Do you feel safe living in this area?	93%	94%
If you saw rubbish in the playground would you pick it up?	93%	93%
If a friend was having difficulty with schoolwork would you help out?	86%	99%
Do you like being with people who are different from you (like from another country)?	48%	90%

Table 2 shows the percentages of "Yes" responses according to the four different age groups (Preschool, Year 1, Year 2, Year 3, and Year 4) of children who participated. As can be seen, the only notable, but arguably predictable, difference was the increase over the years in children's club or group membership.

Table 2. Responses to Social Capital Items According to Age Group

	Preschool	Yr1	Yr2	Yr3
Are you in any clubs or groups?	11.8%	27.3%	27.5%	58.1%
Do you visit friends or relatives very often?	73.5%	72.7%	67.5%	83.9%
Do you get to visit neighbours very often?	61.8%	57.6%	57.5%	51.6%
Do you trust most people?	76.5%	69.7%	57.5%	61.3%
Do you feel safe living in this area?	91.2%	100%	90.0%	93.5%
If you saw rubbish in the playground would you pick it up?	88.2%	90.9%	97.5%	93.5%
If a friend was having difficulty with schoolwork would you help out?	94.1%	100%	97.5%	87.1%
Do you like being with people who are different from you (like from another country)?	84.8%	75.8%	67.5%	80.6%

Open-Ended Questions

Why do you come here?

Most responses to this question could be grouped into one of the five categories shown in Table 3. Many older children provided multiple responses. There were no ascertainable differences between the responses of rural and urban children but differences according to age were apparent. As the table indicates, a clear majority of preschool children believed that they came to preschool simply because they liked it. In other words, these children maintained that they came because they wanted to – as opposed to their parents or guardians wanting them to. By Year 3, on the other hand, few children offered this type of reasoning. Compared with children in Years 1, 2 and 3, few preschoolers claimed that they that they came to preschool to learn. In addition, no preschoolers or Year 1 children believed that they came to school to make friends or came because of favourable qualities or characteristics associated with the school.

Among Year 1 children, practical issues such as proximity of the school or choices made by parents dominated responses, whereas in Year 2, 'to learn' became the primary reason for coming to school. By Year 3, the majority of children's responses suggested that this older group of children had begun to appreciate and focus on attributes of their school that they considered to be unique. For example, many children thought that they attended their school because it was a *good* school or it was their *favourite* school with *nice* or *kind* teachers and children.

Table 3. Responses to 'why do you come here?'

	Preschool	Yr1	Yr2	Yr3
I like it	59.3%	36.4%	30.5%	4.0%
Practical issues (live close by/siblings come /Mum & Dad make me)	18.5%	45.5%	24.9%	32.2%
It's a good/the best school /nice teachers	0%	0%	11.1%	39.3%
We learn	3.7%	30.3%	47.2%	25.0%
To make friends	0%	0%	8.3%	17.9%

What do you like about coming here?

Children, especially those of preschool age, were more able to articulate what they liked about their school than why they attended. The majority of children provided multiple responses. Most responses could be grouped into one of the six categories shown in Table 4. As Table 4 demonstrates, children's response types varied according to their age group. For instance, the most enjoyable aspects of school for preschool and Year 1 children were learning, working, doing literacy, numeracy and computer

activities. Fluid and structural construction activities (including building, painting, sand play), and symbolic play were also popular among preschoolers. However, mention of these activities declined dramatically from Year 1 onwards as a result of these activities no longer being a focus of the curriculum. Among Year 2 and 3 children, being or playing with friends/others was the most liked aspect of going to school while outdoor games, such as *soccer* and *Tiggy* and facilities, such as *the fort,* were popular across all four age groups.

Table 4. Responses to 'What do you like about coming here?'

	Preschool	Yr1	Yr2	Yr3
Being/playing with others	25.0%	25.7%	54.5%	40.0%
Learning/work/literacy/ numeracy/computers	46.9%	65.7%	21.2%	24.0%
Outdoor games/facilities	28.1%	17.1%	39.4%	24.0%
Construction –fluid/ structural activities	40.1%	8.6%	6.1%	4.0%
Play/playing/playtime	6.2%	17.1%	9.1%	2.0%
Symbolic/ pretend play	18.7%	2.8%	0%	0%

What don't you like about coming here?

Regardless of their age, children's responses focused on the unpleasant behaviours of others. Many children referred to instances of bullying, teasing and being hurt, often at the hands of older peers, as negative experiences. In addition, children of all ages indicated that they were upset when excluded by others from games or activities or not allowed to share equipment or resources. To a lesser extent, children across the age groups also disliked particular subjects or activities (for example, *that alphabet thing*). Surprisingly, though, dislike of specific subjects or activities was less common among the older Year 3s who, instead, were likely to comment that they found school *boring.*

Table 5. Responses to 'What don't you like about coming here?'

	Preschool	Yr1	Yr2	Yr3
Bullying/upsetting behaviour	71.4%	74.1%	52.6%	52.2%
Specific subjects/activities	14.3%	14.8%	15.8%	4.3%
Boring /nothing to do	0%	11.1%	5.3%	8.7%

What would a new person need to know in order to be happy here?

The most common responses to this question could be grouped into one of five categories. These categories appear in Table 6. Not surprisingly,

the number and complexity of suggestions offered by the children tended to increase according to age. Nevertheless, with the exception of those in Year 3, the most common response by children was, not so much advice, but an offer of friendship (*I will be their friend*) or help with doing things (such as *tying shoelaces, doing puzzles*). Year 3 children, on the other hand, were more concerned with newcomers knowing, or being shown, where things were. The location of the toilets and the classrooms appeared to be of particular importance.

More than any other group, preschool children recommended that newcomers should be aware of behavioural expectations - that they needed to be *nice, kind, quiet,* they needed *to share* and *not push in* but they were less likely than the other groups to focus on explicit rules. On the other hand, knowledge of, and compliance with, explicit rules and routines was particularly salient for children in Year 3. As children aged, they also became aware of the importance of knowing other's names.

Table 6. Responses to 'What would a new person know in order to be happy here?'

	Preschool	Yr1	Yr2	Yr3
That I'll play with them/ help/teach them	42.8%	56.7%	68.6%	32.0%
Where things are	10.7%	51.3%	40.0%	71.4%
Rules/routines	3.6%	13.5%	14.3%	28.0%
How to behave	28.6%	18.9%	14.3%	12.0%
Other's names	0%	10.8%	22.8%	24.0%

DISCUSSION

This study was unique in its investigation of children's social capital. Given the validity of the Onyx and Bullen (1997)[44] measure and its adaptability for use with children, our instrument suggested that children's social capital was higher in the urban community. Social capital scores were equal or marginally higher in the urban community on most social capital dimensions. Interestingly, data collected from adults in the same communities during a parallel study, indicated that community social capital was higher in the rural locality.

In relation to the individual dimensions, it was encouraging to hear that the majority of children in both the rural and the urban communities agreed that they felt safe living in their area. Children in the rural community, however, were half as likely less likely to be involved in clubs, and marginally less likely to visit friends, relatives or neighbours. As noted, many in the rural community lived some distance from facilities and people, so for these

children, school offered the sole or primary opportunity for socialisation outside of the immediate family.

While most children in both communities agreed that they would help friends with schoolwork if needed, agreement was more pronounced in the urban community. Several children in the rural community explained that such help would amount to *cheating.* Children in the urban community were marginally more likely to agree that they trusted most people but nearly twice as likely to agree that they liked being with people who were different from them. It is probable that this acceptance of others stems from the ethnic diversity that characterises the urban locality in which the children live. Similar exposure to other cultures through increased socialisation may help to reduce rural children's concerns about being with people who are different from them.

Children in the study were found to be *competent informants on their own lives* [34]. Regardless of their school level, children confidently and enthusiastically spoke of advice for newcomers and described what they liked and disliked about their school. It was clear from the open-ended questions with children, that, in both communities, most enjoyed their school life. Indeed, more than half of the preschool children interviewed believed that the reason they attended preschool was *because* they liked it so much.

Although a growing awareness of the need to learn, to make friends and an appreciation of things that were special to their particular school was evident, most children in each of the age groups cited multiple examples of what they liked about school. Certain responses given by preschoolers were characteristic of activities unique to that age group (such as pretend play and construction activities), but, in general, most of the children reported that they liked playing outdoors, socialising with others, and learning about new things. In their interviews with Swedish preschool children, Sheridan and Samuelson (2001)[31] also noted a preference for outdoor, as opposed to indoor, play. With regard to being with others, socialising and making friends appeared to become more salient in Years 2 and 3 at a time when children's relationships outside of the home assume greater importance. These older children were also more likely to comment that they were members of clubs or groups.

Children's love of learning, making friends and being physically active was clear but was tempered with less pleasant experiences with others. Almost three quarters of preschool and Year 1 children and more than half of Year 2 and Year 3 children in both localities referred to acts of verbal or physical aggression by other children as a source of unhappiness. Acts of aggression were also a "least favourite" activity among day care children in a study by Armstrong and Sugawara (1989)[29] and one of five aspects of nursery school that children in Evans and Fuller's (1998)[32] study disliked.

In relation to advice for newcomers, preschool, Year 1 and Year 2 children focused on emotional support and assistance with tasks. Year 3 children, on the other hand, were primarily concerned with pragmatic issues such as where things are, rules and routines and people's names. This emerging awareness of the social geography and daily routines of school life

was also implicit in the responses of Year 3 children in an earlier study by Farrell, Tayler, Tennent and Gahan (2002)[30].

Conclusions and recommendations

The study indicates that further investigation of children's social capital is warranted. The impact of children's networks and community involvement on their health and wellbeing is an area of particular interest to the researchers. Future studies would be enriched by the expansion of children's social capital questions to ask, for example, about the types of services and activities that children would like in their community and the types of clubs or groups that children are, or would like to be, members of. The study also highlights the importance of eliciting children's views about their educational experiences. It is of particular concern that negative experiences such as bullying are reported so frequently by children as young as four years-of-age. As Evans and Fuller (1998)[32] noted, such reports call for *vigilance by practitioners to ensure that children's rights not to endure such experiences are met* (p. 73).

Lastly, the study affirmed the importance of listening to children and parents – the key stakeholders in early childhood services. Both must be respected as "social and cultural actors" (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000, p.31)[28], whose accounts should underpin the nature of, and future directions in, the provision of child and family services.

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