The Growth of an Early Childhood Research Culture: Implications for Future Directions in Early Childhood Research

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Six years after the first Early Childhood Research Symposium of 61 researchers and postgraduate students in December 1997 it is timely to reflect on the contribution of the New Zealand Early Childhood Research Network that was formed as an outcome of that symposium to the emergence of a research culture in early childhood education. In 1993, speaking at a New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) early childhood conference, following my return to New Zealand after more than a decade in Australia, I commented on the "absence of an independent organisation with a research and development focus"... as "an obvious area for development" (Cullen, 1993, p. 79). To what extent do the Network and the symposia fulfill such a function? What do the current contributions of the Network and symposia suggest for future research directions in early childhood education?

The post 1993 decade witnessed several events that contributed to the emergence of a "critical mass" of early childhood educators who were willing to participate in the growth of an early childhood research environment. Among these were the emergence of postgraduate studies in early childhood education, the appointment of New Zealand's first early childhood education Professor at Victoria University of Wellington, and the professional debate and Ministry-funded professional development research contracts associated with the development, publication and implementation of Te Whaariki, New Zealand's first early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996).

In 1995, the annual conference of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education (NZARE) was held at Massey University in Palmerston North. The programme included a strong early childhood strand, organised by Sarah Farquhar, a Massey early childhood staff member who was on the conference committee. During a lunch break a group met to gauge interest in forming an early childhood special interest group. In 1996, at the Nelson NZARE Conference, Sarah Farquhar organised a lunch-time meeting of early childhood researchers which agreed that a dedicated meeting time was needed and that an early childhood research group should be formed. One outcome of this meeting was the creation of the email group list. A second outcome was the first Early Childhood Research Symposium which was held as a pre-session of the next NZARE
conference, in Auckland in 1997, with the aim of supporting beginning researchers and the growth of a research culture in early childhood education. Both of these formative activities were organised by Sarah Farquhar. The proceedings of the first symposium were published as New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education (NZRECE), edited by Sarah Farquhar. The following year the journal moved towards becoming a recognised refereed academic journal. The symposium and journal are now annual events and part of the early childhood landscape in New Zealand. In 2002 “ChildForum” became the brand name of the New Zealand Early Childhood Research Network. “ChildForum” was defined as encompassing both early childhood education and parenting research. The Network under ChildForum and Sarah Farquhar’s ongoing leadership has begun to look towards strengthening its development and research focus.

Contributions of the NZECE Journal and Symposia

Between 1997 and 2003 the symposia have moved from a forum with invited speakers and participatory sessions about research interests towards a more traditional conference format with a keynote speaker and parallel presentations. This movement is partly an outcome of the strong support for the symposia and the high numbers attending that have limited participatory activities. In the process, maintaining the key focus on supporting beginning researchers poses an on-going challenge. At the 2001 symposium in Christchurch, Caterina Murphy, an early childhood postgraduate student, surveyed participants in a discussion session for postgraduate students (Murphy, 2001). The findings supported the role of the symposia for networking (with mentors and fellow students) and disseminating ideas about research. At the 2002 symposium in Palmerston North the distinction between research papers and roundtable presentations was an attempt to structure sessions that allowed for critical debate and dialogue about research.

An examination of the NZRECE from 1997-2003 reveals several phases in its growth as a research journal that indicate the rapid growth of an early childhood research community.

- **Phase 1.** Volume 1 included papers and notes on research issues and methodology, by invited speakers, and listed research interests of participants.

- **Phase 2.** Volume 2 reflected the symposium theme of practitioner research, and included postgraduate collaborative action research as well as practitioner-initiated research. A research activities section included notes on completed research, current research presentations, reviews and discussion papers. Volume 2 introduced a new category of edited research notes as well as a new role of peer reviewer, as this issue aimed to meet blind peer-reviewing standards. An editorial team assisted with the review process.

- **Phase 3.** Volume 3 introduced a new article category, the commentary, with two invited commentaries from established academics. With five research reports and two research notes, the journal dropped the research activities
section and was now presenting as a more traditional academic research journal. The symposium had published a call for papers, and the journal reflected the wide variety of research interests in the early childhood community, based on professional roles, theoretical and applied interests. By 1999 it was apparent that the symposia and journal were no longer dependent on experienced academic “experts”, although contributions from established academics continued. Volumes 4 to 6 have continued this pattern and now include articles that have been submitted by authors who have not contributed to the Symposium but who have responded to an invitation for submissions in accordance with the “Instructions for Contributors”, printed in the journal.

Trends, Themes and Issues

Several patterns that raise issues for future early childhood research are evident from an examination of the journals’ content:

- Research reports are based primarily on small-scale qualitative studies.

- Postgraduate researchers are the most frequent contributors, with few contributions from established researchers or senior academics.

- The research reported is largely outside of funded contract research, such as that conducted by NZCER, and/or commissioned and funded by the Ministry of Education. Two exceptions are Gaffney and Smith’s (2001) paper, based on the Ministry-funded ECE Literature Review, and Carroll-Lind and Cullen’s (this volume) report based on data from the SE 2000 monitoring and evaluation contract.

- There is little coherence to topics and themes, although this is not surprising given the predominance of postgraduate research. Some topics reflect trends and debates in the sector; for example, portfolios as a form of assessment (Te One, 2001) and the place of subject content in teacher education (Haynes, 2000). Others explore theoretical issues, such as Brennan’s (2000) research note on TV play and intersubjectivity. Te Whāariki has not appeared as a major focus of research prior to Haggerty’s analytic article in this volume (although indirectly it may influence research questions, as in Prince’s 2000 investigation about environmental education).

- Hard issues are addressed. These include: biculturalism, the ethics of collaborative research, and of research with young children; and the need for an academic “buddy” in practitioner research – a precursor of the research model that has subsequently been promoted in the Ministry-funded centres of innovation. Liberty (2001) poses a challenge to the exclusive use of qualitative methodologies in her report on the use of a multi-method design with children with special needs.

The journals’ issues reflect the emergence of an era of “early childhood” researchers from within the early childhood community, often concerned with research questions of direct relevance to practice. Compare this with the 1970s
when early childhood research was conducted by education researchers (e.g. David Barney) and commentary and review of preschool education led by education professors, Philip Lawrence and Clem Hill, from outside of what could now be called (in sociocultural terms) the early childhood “community of practice”. These outside experts were joined by Anne Meade at NZCER and Anne Smith at Otago University, both of whom made significant contributions to the growth of early childhood research in New Zealand, from the 1970s.

Such trends confirm that the symposia have provided a forum for both beginning researchers and for more established researchers to share their work and/or to raise issues about methodology. Importantly, the symposia demonstrate the presence of debate and dialogue in the early childhood research community.

Continuing issues for the future of the symposia and journal are also evident. There are issues regarding quality of presentations, research and publications. The symposia programmes continue to reflect the difficulty of maintaining a balance between sessions that support beginning researchers, and as a forum for dissemination of research. The diversity of topics in the NZRECE raises the issue of whether themed editions should be used. Themed editions could provide a more coherent presentation of research and possibly encourage experienced academics to contribute.

The success of the symposia and NZRECE does not mean that quality research can be easily achieved in the early childhood sector. Indeed, a reading of the journals suggests not only a dynamic and rapidly evolving field but also some misconceptions about the research process. These can be considered through the metaphorical device of a well-known proverb.

One swallow does not make [summer] spring. (Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, I, 7.16.) Or: a single indicator of something is not necessarily significant.

Misconception 1: The over-dissemination issue

One (small) piece of research can generate many presentations. In 1980, Anne Meade made a similar observation about the large number of publications that stemmed from a single piece of research. Perhaps this phenomenon reflects the positive support from the ECE community for early childhood researchers, but it also can be viewed as a reminder that we need to distinguish primary research reports from dissemination and debate, and acknowledge any limitations of the research base.

Misconception 2: The over-statement issue

One (small) data set does not necessarily make a research project. Reflective teaching activities and practical assignments may not meet the criteria of sound research (although this does not necessarily undermine the value of these activities for professional purposes). Research reports need to meet the criteria
appropriate for empirical research reports or case studies (see, for example, APA, 2001) and/or the relevant discipline.

**Misconception 3: The apprenticeship issue**

One completed project does not (necessarily) make a researcher. On-going critique and dialogue are essential to maintain a spirit of inquiry and to develop a repertoire of research skills. (See, for example, Gaffney’s 2002 discussion of the research journey.)

**Misconception 4. The uniqueness issue**

A New Zealand study is unique and does not need to be related to international research. The failure of research reports to situate New Zealand research as part of a critical analysis of international studies can limit both the contribution of the specific research and the accepted channels of international communication between researchers.

Clearly, a research culture should facilitate a supportive environment for dialogue about the research process. It would be naive, however, to promote the view that an early childhood research culture is sufficient to yield a body of quality research. Any examination of future directions for research cannot be independent of a range of contextual influences, some of which have already been signalled in the journal analysis.

**Contextual Influences on Research**

**Postgraduate research requirements**

The supervision requirements of postgraduate research include another voice in research design and interpretation. In this regard, the increase of early childhood expertise in the university sector has helped to develop research that is sensitive to the sector’s needs and which has the potential to challenge existing beliefs and practices. Institutional ethical review requirements may be inconsistent with and challenge some early childhood practices (e.g. informed consent versus passive consent; see Hedges, 2001). Ethical protocols may also encourage “safe” or “bland” research topics, particularly at Master’s level where time and funding constraints can interfere with the time needed to work through ethical issues.

**Institutional policies and culture**

Historically there have been different cultures and research ethos in universities, colleges of education, and polytechnics although to some extent this is breaking down under the influence of an era of externally funded contract research, and the new performance-based research funding (PRBF) policy introduced by the Tertiary Education Commission in 2003. New pressures on staff to be “research active”, in PRBF terms, and to meet “research productivity” criteria could increasingly impact on the style and autonomy of researchers.
Contractual research requirements

Researcher autonomy can be challenged by the time constraints of short-term contracts, ambiguous research questions imposed by contract requirements, and by delays in release of findings. These issues are not specific to New Zealand (e.g. see Aubrey, David, Godfrey & Thompson, 1999). On the whole, Ministry of Education contracts have worked well for the early childhood sector as on-going work on assessment, programme evaluation, and exemplars attest. Ministry contracts of this type are supportive of the curriculum philosophy reflected in Te Whaariki and illustrate the views of Aubrey et al (1999) that contract research can “interrogate policy”. Conversely, a researcher’s commitment to contract research that focuses on national research and development needs can have a negative impact on researcher productivity (at least in terms of PRBF criteria), by limiting opportunities to publish in international peer-reviewed journals.

Challenges to the sector may also result from external contracts. The best evidence syntheses, contracted by the Ministry of Education (e.g. Farquhar, 2003) represent a current international concern with evidence-based policy and a focus on the outcomes of education. The best evidence reviewing technique originates in health research where criteria for research design are rigorous (e.g. randomised trials, conservative statistical cut-off points) and can exclude studies that do not meet the pre-determined criteria (Evans & Benefield, 2001; Hammersley, 2001). The positivist model of reviewing that is inherent in the medically-derived best evidence synthesis (or systematic) reviewing approach (Elliott, 2001) is not easily transferred to the small numbers of qualitative studies that typify the NZ early childhood scene. Further, the privileging of outcomes-based research evidence can undermine evidence from other sources, including practice (Hammersly, 2001) and exclude consideration of an articulate educational theory (Elliott, 2001).

Nevertheless, it can be salutary to review the relevant literature from a best evidence perspective. In many cases, there is very little evidence, let alone “best” evidence that meets established methodological criteria. Best evidence syntheses and the related notion of “evidence-based practice” can be inclusive of qualitative research when criteria for judging research are drawn from the extensive qualitative methodological literature (e.g. Liberty & Miller, 2003). However, in the New Zealand context where isolated case study data tends to dominate there is a risk that early childhood research could be generalised beyond that warranted by the particular findings. In this regard, Liberty’s (2001) recommendations for multi-method research designs to investigate the progress of young children with special needs is worthy of consideration in a wider sense as we move into a second decade of Te Whaariki’s influence on the early childhood sector. Does Te Whaariki make a difference to children’s educational progress and how can we investigate this question in ways that are consistent with the educational values that guide the sector and that avoid narrow technicist interpretations of outcomes-based education (Cullen, 2003)?
Education policy

The education reforms of the 1990s have influenced research on topics such as bulk funding (e.g. Duncan, 2001). The early childhood curriculum and associated documents provide an example of a consultative, reflexive, iterative process, although this has not been without its frustration and challenges. The inclusive Special Education 2000 policy has also generated research and professional development contracts. The introduction of performance-based research funding in the tertiary sector rewards excellence in research, with international, peer-reviewed publications as a primary indicator of excellence. While international contributions can make a major contribution to a field (e.g. Carr's 2001 contribution to the assessment literature) this type of research profile as a sole publication strategy will not necessarily address the needs of the early childhood sector which is still attaining graduate status. NZRECE is likely to continue to have an important function as an outlet for beginning researchers but other journals with a practitioner focus which also contribute to dialogue and debate may be in jeopardy. How many researchers will have time to publish in such journals? It is possible that the researcher's "journey", described by Michael Gaffney (2002), could take different pathways in the future.

Theoretical and methodological trends and fashion

The qualitative focus of early childhood research is a clear indicator of changes in educational research that began in the 1980s. For example, Lincoln and Guba (2000), writing about research paradigms in the second edition of the Handbook of qualitative research, included the "participatory/co-operative" paradigm, in addition to positivism, postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism which they had considered in the first edition of the Handbook, in 1994. The current popularity of postmodern, social constructivist and interpretivist philosophies in early childhood education is also supportive of qualitative methodologies. There will be future paradigm changes to influence research questions and design. Postgraduate research is often an early reflection of paradigm change because of its location in research-based institutions and this quality is a positive contribution to the early childhood research environment, as reflected in NZRECE and symposia.

Future Directions

Future research directions may be identified on the basis of literature reviews of research, for example, Gaffney and Smith (2001) and Smith et al., (2000), or best evidence syntheses (Farquhar, 2003). In Australia, the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs funded a research fellowship to conduct a nation-wide investigation of the early childhood profession perceptions of research needs (Fleer, 2002). In New Zealand, the consultative process that resulted in the 10-year Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education, could be viewed as a parallel process. The Strategic Plan, Pathways to the future: Nga huarahi aratiki (Ministry of Education, 2002) provides some hints of contracts to come:
- Longitudinal research will measure the progress of the implementation (p. 9);
- Research to provide information for policies to encourage early childhood education participation that will achieve the best results for children (p. 11);
- Research into early childhood education teacher supply and workforce issues (p. 15);
- Research into ways to support parents and whanau led early childhood education services (p. 15);
- Centres of innovation with a collaborative action research component.

In part, these strategic developments provide a research infrastructure for the early childhood sector. However, independent academic research that may be unfunded or supported by small institutional grants, retains important functions because of the greater researcher autonomy to pursue specific interests that may be theoretically driven, or problem-based but not necessarily in accord with Ministry policy. The government’s Marsden Fund also provides funding for “blue skies” research by established researchers, but where does postgraduate research fit? Whether it is via serendipity, theory, or a practical problem, the research experience often starts with the smaller topics explored by postgraduate students, which in turn develop abilities to deal with larger questions and larger data sets. These research experiences contribute to the growth of a dynamic research culture that in turn can support goals of quality research. Several challenges face early childhood researchers as they strive to develop a research culture that supports quality research.

**Challenges for the Early Childhood Research Community**

**Critical debate**

Commitment and “passion” for one’s topic are insufficient to achieve quality research, if the analytic criteria of research are not met. Acceptance of diverse viewpoints and willingness to examine critically current perspectives are also important (e.g. see Haggerty’s “reconceptualist” analysis of Te Whaariki, this volume).

**Evidence-based practice**

Research reports that meet methodological criteria of quality are important from this perspective, as is a willingness to examine philosophies and practices from an evidence base. Lack of evidence does not necessarily mean a theory of practice is “wrong” but it does mean that research needs to be conducted.

**Critical reviewing skills**

NZRECE has introduced a peer reviewer role to support its blind reviewing requirements. Reviewing skills require abilities to examine research analytically.
according to accepted quality criteria. Such skills are strengthened by the development of critical literature reviewing skills, an essential prerequisite for the beginning researcher.

Critical consumers of research

Critical debate is also important for consumers of research. For example, NZCER's Competent Children study (Wylie, 2001; Wylie, Thompson & Lythe, 2001) has received positive acclaim for its demonstration of the significance of quality early childhood education for subsequent achievement at school. Yet the full reports contain many qualifications to this conclusion and questions have been raised about the appropriateness of the statistical analyses (See Nash, 2001, and Wylie & Thompson, 2001, for response.). These issues do not necessarily invalidate the quality findings but it is important that an early childhood research culture supports such critical debate, as a normal part of the research process.

Methodological quality

If a focus on evidence-based policy and practice escalates there will be a particular need for researchers to design studies that provide evidence that is valid for the diverse settings and groups involved in early education in New Zealand. An outcomes-based approach does not necessarily signal a return to a positivist paradigm; it does suggest that multi-method research warrants greater attention than it is currently receiving in the New Zealand early childhood context so that different kinds of questions can be answered.

Partnership research

Participatory action research raises particular ethical issues concerning the role of the researcher and respect for all participants that will challenge researchers involved in the new collaborative Centre of Innovation contracts from the Ministry of Education. Further, when research is culturally-based relationships may encompass many dimensions, as argued by Bishop and Glynn (1999) with regard to Maori research.

The Role of the Network, including Journal and Symposia

Many of the contributions at the symposia and in the journal are indicative of healthy debate in the sector that is supportive of a dynamic research culture. This issue's contributors reflect a range of research interests: for example, policy (Carroll-Lind, Alvestad), theory (Richards, Rockel, Surman), professional issues (Kennedy, McEvilly, McLeod), and curriculum (Haggerty, Hedges). Significantly, each paper could also be viewed from several interests, illustrating relationships across policy, research and practice. This characteristic of the contributions is a positive indicator of future developments in the early childhood sector. Practitioners, academic and postgraduate researchers, work within different sets of constraints, as do policy makers. A dynamic reflexive relationship between
policy, research and practice could bring about a productive alignment between the research goals of the various participants. The extent to which the research expressed through the activities of the network, symposia and NZRECE support and facilitate such a relationship could be a useful lens through which to examine these activities in future years.

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References


