“The Way We Do Things Around Here”:
Environmental and Social Considerations of the
Organisational Culture of Two Playcentres.

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Abstract

The organisational culture of an early childhood centre shapes how members behave and is, in turn, modified or maintained by these actions. Every centre is a product of its members’ thoughts and actions and as such has a distinctiveness that can be difficult to define. This paper reports on an investigation into the organisational culture of two New Zealand Playcentres that explored the ways in which the culture influenced the learning experiences of the children. The study, which focussed on the morning tea routine, indicated that the physical environment and historical influences impacted on the practices and beliefs in the centre, and the social relationships and systems that were in evidence were indicators of tacit assumptions of the participants.

Introduction

This research focussed on the setting of an early childhood service, the New Zealand Playcentre, through a study of organisational culture. Because the organisational culture of an education setting is complex, a keyhole of the morning tea routine was chosen through which to view it. The larger study that this paper is drawn from (Gibbons, 2004) considered the relationship between learning and the social situation in which the learning occurs.

Playcentre is one of a range of early childhood services in New Zealand. In difference to most other services its main purpose is not to care for and educate children in the parents’ absence but to actively involve parents as educators during sessions and in adult education to diploma level. Children under two and one-half years attend when their parent is present, with older children able to attend up to five half-day sessions a week. Playcentre philosophy emphasises that children’s well-being and education is nurtured by empowering parents in their parenting role, involving them in adult education in early childhood education and self development, and supporting them during this time in their lives. Similar to other early childhood services playcentres, in the main, meet Ministry of Education requirements for licensing and chartering and follow Te Whaariki, the national curriculum for early childhood, with the national body also meeting New Zealand Qualifications Authority requirements as a tertiary education provider.
Playcentre involves member families in consensus decision making about their local centre and national direction. Emergent leadership, which is the encouragement of adults to gradually take responsibility, is a foundational aspect of Playcentre philosophy (Goldschmidt, 1998). Historically, children under two and one-half years were not enrolled in playcentres although they accompanied parents when they were on duty. This was because the educational programme was considered to be for three- and four-year-olds, in line with kindergartens (Stover, 1998). Government funding was not made available for under two-year-olds until the early 1990s. Toddlers and infants now join in sessions alongside their parents, are enrolled and are part of the regular programme planning cycle.

**Literature Review**

Sergiovanni (2000), considering organisational culture in schools, noted that the concept is abstract and could be considered as the ‘normative glue’ that bonds an educational setting together. It is the ‘way that things are’ in a setting: of an intangible nature, but forceful, and observable through the behaviour of its members (Corbett, Firestone & Rossmann, 1987; Ott, 1989; Poskitt, 1989; Schein, 1992). It prescribes the ways in which members behave and interact with each other (Corbett et al., 1987; Sergiovanni, 2000). Usually such behaviours are taken for granted and acted on unconsciously by the organisation. The culture and its parts can be understood by studying the people as cultural participants (Hatherly, 1997) in an evolving activity and acknowledging that the members of an organisation are continually involved in generating its culture (Staessens, 1993).

The compulsory education sector began using the concept of organisational culture during the 1980s and 1990s after seeing its widespread use in the business sector. It allowed schools to be studied as a whole entity, through case studies, often looking at effectiveness, leadership and management or administration (Beare, Caldwell & Millikan, 1989). Research emerging from the commercial sector (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Peters & Waterman, 1982) was showing that successful businesses had identifiable cultural traits, and from this, planned organisational change was heralded as a way of improving an organisation.

Excellence in the business sector was measured in terms of financial success rather than learning outcomes. Nevertheless, educational theorists were interested in the concept and the ideas of Total Quality Management, and tested their transferability to the educational sector (Greenwood & Gaunt, 1994; Keesing-Styles, 1999; Sallis, 2002). By the 1990s much research on organisational culture in education had school change and improvement as a basis for the research (Kieviet & Vandenbarghe, 1993; Lewis, 1994; Nias, Southworth & Yeomans, 1989; Poskitt, 1989).

Several studies show that the organisational culture of an early childhood centre or school, including the underlying beliefs of the staff, can shape the learning environment. For example, when the culture of a school encourages staff to accept responsibility and take initiative, children in the classroom were encouraged in similar ways (Goldman, 1998). In schools where teaching staff were not encouraged in school-wide discussion
on issues, attempts at open-ended discussions in the classroom were not found to engage the children. When teachers work collaboratively, and share pedagogical beliefs and goals for children, there are positive effects on learning for the children (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Rosenholtz, 1991; Vandenberghe, D’hertefelt & de Wever, 1993).

McLeod (2002) reported that the beliefs of centre personnel, which surfaced in participant interviews, frequently contradicted their rhetoric and often were not, in terms of curriculum, matched to currently accepted theory. The opportunities for children’s learning were thus shaped more by the unconsciously held assumptions of the staff, than their espoused beliefs. Where certain educational values are desirable in children, then these values must be modelled by the adults in the organisation (Goldman, 1998).

Views of children held by teachers were found to have a substantial effect on the management and educational practices in early childhood centres (Hatherly, 1997; McLeod, 2002). Often these views stemmed from the beliefs held by the founder of the centre, and were central to the centre’s current organisational culture. McLeod found that management models used in centres were contextually based and stemmed from the organisational culture.

Carr’s (2001) research investigated social identities (Smiley & Dweck, 1994) to which children in early childhood centres sought to belong. These had a basis of performance goals (for example ‘being good’) or learning goals (for example ‘being a technologist’). Carr found that underlying beliefs and assumptions held by those in the centre underpinned these goals. In the context of the present research, this is interpreted to mean that the performance or learning goals were not dependent on the child, but were enmeshed in the organisational culture of the centre. Carr’s research concurs with Kiley and Jensen (2003) and McLeod (2002) in concluding that adults involved in early childhood settings need to be aware of the underlying cultural norms and assumptions of their community, and how they are incorporated into the activities of the centre. This, sometimes invisible, organisational culture is controlled by the participants of the organisation, who together, form the organisation (Nias et al., 1989).

Three Head Start programmes in the United States of America (Lubeck, Jessup, deVries & Post, 2001) were researched over three years to examine how contexts mattered to the programmes. It was discovered that each programme was different, and what defined the difference was the organisational culture. Through discovering differing practices across the sites Lubeck et al. concluded that mandates (legislative requirements and national-organisational requirements) “are real-ised in different ways” (Lubeck et al., p. 504). Facets which in one setting are valued may not be valued the same in another.

Kiley and Jensen (2003) suggest that researching features of the organisational culture in an early childhood centre offers a multifaceted approach to investigating a learning environment. This paper explores what happened during the routine of morning tea that indicated the organisational culture of two playcentres. An overview of the conceptual framework developed and methodology of the study is given. The five facets of organisational culture that emerged are explained, with two of these, environmental and social, being discussed in depth. Tacit assumptions about aspects of the organisational
culture of the two playcentres have been made from the environmental and social facets discussed.

Methodology

Research Question

The research question addressed was “what is going on here?” The research took a holistic perspective to consider each playcentre in its entirety, acknowledging that each were also part of wider social, cultural and historical contexts.

Sample

The two playcentres chosen for this research, code-named Rimu and Kauri, were in urban suburbs and licensed as sessional centres. These centres were chosen because of the researcher’s familiarity with each centre, the relative stability of the families belonging and the participants’ willingness to be involved. Each playcentre had an average of 20 children enrolled on any one session, ranging in age from birth to five years, with five educators present for each session. In both playcentres the educators differed for each day of the week and the composition of the groups of children present varied. Both playcentres operated under team supervision, with a parent from each family required to take a weekly turn as educator (unless excused for health reasons). Some parents, with higher training levels, opted to be an educator twice a week. Families chose how many sessions their child was to attend (up to five per week), and which days they would attend, to allow for the children to be involved in other community and home activities. The older children (four year-olds) were the most constant participants in the research.

Rimu was in a purpose-built centre, and Kauri operated from a renovated hall. Both playcentres had what could be considered spacious outdoor play areas. The sessions offered were two and one-half hours in length, and both playcentres had six sessions running each week. The programme of each session was usually based around children’s self-selected play, with a group gathering for a snack midway through the session. At Rimu, food was prepared at the playcentre for a shared morning tea, while at Kauri the children brought their snack in a lunch box.

Method

A qualitative methodology drawing on ethnographic perspectives and using a case study approach of an event was used. Data collection consisted of anecdotal observations carried out over ten sessions for each playcentre, providing detailed descriptions of the event; informal, conversational interviewing with educators; informal interviewing with children; a photo journal of varying aspects of the morning teatime used as a starting point for discussion with children and adults; and the collecting of written material produced by the playcentre. A focus group discussion was held in both playcentres, involving one third of the adult participants, for further exploration of the topic.
Data Analysis

Analysis began at the same time as the data collection, allowing the two to develop alongside each other and be mutually influential. The written transcripts were initially coded into patterns with two frameworks used to interpret and explain the routine studied:

1. Schein’s (1992) three levels of organisational culture.

Each playcentre was examined during the routine of morning tea time. Schein’s (1992) three levels of culture were used in an initial consideration of the data. This provided an understanding of the data on three layers: the very visible and obvious artefacts, the espoused values of the group, and the shared, tacit assumptions. This analysis, while providing depth of understanding, did not provide a framework through which the data could be categorised. Therefore a further thematic analysis and interpretation was made using an adaptation of a model by Bush (1995). This examined the playcentre’s culture in terms of environmental, social, philosophical, structural and pedagogical considerations.

Metaphors from the field of optics were used in this research to enable study of the playcentres. Other education researchers have reported that such metaphors are useful (Agee, 2002; Rogoff, 2003; Roth, 2001). The routine of morning teatime was considered a ‘keyhole’ through which each playcentre was viewed. Schein’s (1992) levels of culture provided the three depths or intensities of consideration. The five aspects of organisational culture, from the adaptation of Bush’s (1995) model, were portrayed as a series of ‘colour filters’ to enable the different aspects of organisational culture to be examined. In the same way as viewing an object through a transparent coloured filter allows only colours that reflect the same light to be seen, the research results are viewed through five filters, enabling only that consideration to be explored at one time.

Figure 1 below shows the five filters and interactions between the filters. Use of the metaphor of coloured filters allowed each playcentre’s organisational culture to be considered in five ways. These were:

1. Environmental: the physical and historical features of the playcentre which impacted on the practices and beliefs of the members.
2. Social: the relationships between participants, the social structures evident, and the systems of leadership.
3. Philosophical: the beliefs, values and goals of the participants, both current and past.
4. Structural: the organisational facets of the playcentre, and the activities that occur on a day-to-day basis.
5. Pedagogical: the main pedagogical strategies of the educators.
In this paper the findings pertaining to the environmental and social facets are focused on.

**Reliability and Validity**

The effects of the researcher’s presence were taken into account, and biases and ideological preferences were acknowledged (see Gibbons, 2004). The research involved data collection and analysis from two cases, with each providing multiple sources of evidence, all of which converged to provide trustworthiness and triangulation.

To identify underlying values and beliefs of playcentre members required direct and lengthy discussions with the participants. Although the findings were validated with the participants, in depth discussion about their values was not attempted. Whilst their beliefs were raised in the focus groups, using open-ended questions, further reflective time delving into this would have added consensual data. The tacit assumptions identified in this research, therefore, are suggestions based on the researcher’s interpretation of espoused values, documentation, and practice.
Ethics

The research took into consideration the ethics of informed consent, confidentiality, minimising of harm, truthfulness, and social sensitivity. It was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (PN Protocol 02/26), and was overseen by two supervisors from the university. The Playcentre Association approved the research, and accountability measures were put in place and complied with.

Findings

Environmental Facet No 1: Communication between Team Members

At both playcentres the morning-tea time was the only time that all educators and children were gathered in one area for the same purpose. At all other times they moved freely during sessions throughout the buildings and the grounds. Coming together as a whole group was seen as important for communication, and to reinforce the sense of belonging to the group.

Informal communication happened throughout each session between educators with constant opportunities for them to observe and learn from each other. The knowledge that other adults could always be called upon, and were there to share their knowledge and skills was an underlying taken-for-granted. Communication between team members was valued as necessary for the smooth operation of the session at Rimu and Kauri.

Environmental Facet No 2: Access to Learning in the Kitchen

Children’s access to some of the areas of each playcentre was restricted. Rimu’s kitchen had low gates, a requirement for safety regulations, and this inhibited children from fully contributing to the preparation of the morning-tea. Because of this educators at Rimu took on a role of catering for children, and this continued with them serving food to the children at the tables, rather than a general sharing and offering to each other. A tacit assumption at Rimu, influenced by the environmental restraint of the kitchen location, was that some adults’ work required separation from children, for the protection of children.

Kauri’s galley kitchen, (since remodelled to a separate space) being part of the main thoroughfare, enabled children to access plates, cups, cutlery and participate in preparation, as required. Kitchen access provided children with an opportunity to help each other. For example, when Krystal said that her mother had forgotten to put a spoon in her lunch box for her yoghurt, Zac left the table, and returned bringing a spoon for her. The ease of kitchen access for children at Kauri mirrored what is usually a normal part of children’s learning and experience in the home setting.
Environmental Facet No 3: Team Teaching

The elongated shape of the building at Rimu meant the tables for morning-tea needed to be placed in a long rectangle. Prior to morning-tea there was usually some singing. During this time all the educators usually spread out amongst the children around the tables, so every child had an adult within sight for the purpose of following both the singing and actions. The adults, including relatively new playcentre parents, accepted this role, and the children were familiar with multiple role models including their own parent. For Rimu the data analysis showed that an underlying belief was that all the adults present at the session were in a teaching role.

At Kauri, because of the width and layout of the building, the children usually sat in a circle on the carpet for singing, and it would have been possible for one educator to lead the singing alone. However, because of the team approach of the playcentre, several educators usually joined in. The physical structure of the building influenced the ways educators worked together as a team, how they placed themselves in the environment, and therefore, the way learning experiences for children occurred.

Environmental Facet No 4: Care of Toddlers

The view of younger children at morning-tea time was frequently different from that of older children (see the Introduction section on the acceptance of younger children). At Kauri, the morning-tea time for toddlers was primarily for their nutritional needs. Both playcentres had highchairs, with those at Kauri being set back a long way from the tables, so they were “safe from being bumped”, and where the children were less distracted. As Paula explained:

There’s so much activity going on around the table … so if he’s a little bit away, it’s just a bit quieter and then he can get down to the business of eating.

At Rimu, the highchairs were near or beside the main tables, with social interaction possible and happening between toddlers and older children. At both playcentres the educators whose toddlers attended the session expressed the belief that they, rather than the team, were responsible for their own child. At both playcentres the tacit assumption was that toddlers required more care than older children and that this was easiest met by their parent.

Social Facet No 1: Friendships

Child friendships were very noticeable at the morning-tea tables, especially amongst the three- and four-year-olds. Seats were saved for friends and often others were called to sit alongside. It was important to the older children who they sat beside, but not so for younger children, who usually, during most of the seated time, watched others and quietly ate their food. Friendships were facilitated by the adults, with children able to choose who to sit with, whether to chat or observe, how long to stay at the table, and being able to help each other and accept the role of contributing to others’ well being.
For some adults the morning-tea time was seen as an opportunity to build and maintain friendships with children. For example, Terry said:

During play I tend to gravitate towards one group of children, and I might not get to know all the children as well, because my preference is obviously in a particular direction even if I’m not aware of it. So at morning-tea I make an effort to get to know the other children.

However the majority of the adults saw the time as a chance for children to chat without adult intervention. At Kauri some adults chose not to sit with the children for this reason. As Paul expressed:

Whenever the kids are sitting at the table, and there is an adult, there is a mind block. Whenever I came, if I sat down I’d sit in between them [my children], and then they wouldn’t interact with anybody else. They’re looking at Daddy for the right thing to do, ‘cause that happens at home. So when we’re at Playcentre, I don’t sit beside them.

Educators, also, used the morning-tea time to build their adult friendships, often unconsciously role-modelling to children that socialising is good, by chatting with each other.

As well as chatting, there was humour shared between children. They were building social skills during the routine. At both playcentres the belief was that playcentre is a place to make friends and build relationships, and children could be trusted to nurture these friendships.

**Social Facet No 2: Independence**

At both playcentres the tacit assumption was that independence should be encouraged. The group morning-tea was only partially for the purpose of building social community (Gonzalez-Mena, 2003), although as above the only time all came together, and was used as occasion for friends chat and have a group identity. At Kauri, the children ate from their own lunch boxes, and when completed were able to leave at will, putting away their own box and drink bottle.

At Rimu the adults rarely encouraged the passing and offering of food to each other. They would often offer an initial piece of food to children and then place the serving plate on the table for the children to further help themselves to. Children’s independence and self-care skills were encouraged by the use of small jugs at the tables, for them to pour their own drinks. When they had finished eating, they were expected and encouraged to take their own plate and cup to the kitchen.
Social Facet No 3: Valuing all Educators

Adults’ roles and ways of working together were clearly shown during the morning-tea time. Both playcentres operated with a team of different parents on duty, as educators, each session. Every term these teams altered, to allow for those leaving, new people entering, altered attendance patterns of children, or to encourage different educators to work together for new learning. Nevertheless in both playcentres, for most days, the cohesiveness of the teams was obvious. Teresa explains how she knew what role to play at Kauri: “you just sort of watch for who’s doing what”.

Rimu had a roster system for the various aspects of morning-tea, such as food preparation, calling the roll and leading singing. Much of the cohesiveness depended on the educators being aware of each other and working with their knowledge of the others on the team. There were frequent occasions where one educator openly supported another:

Cara is calling the roll. Some children begin to chat. Cara: “can we be a bit quieter? My throat hurts if I talk loudly.” Lorene (standing nearby): “hey, let’s be quiet. It’s a bit rude not to listen to Cara.”

Educators felt comfortable relying on others, and the team approach. When one educator spoke up to support another, this was accepted as a technique for support, not a sign of his or her inability. Reliance on others in many ways was an expectation with the assumption being that teamwork was an effective way of valuing everybody.

Social Facet No 4: Belonging

At both playcentres there was an assumption that children and adults should first be familiar with and feel comfortable about being in the setting before being expected to be part of the group and meet expectations. For both children and adults, ‘belonging’ was considered necessary before ‘contribution’ or full participation was expected and possible.

Adults were gently eased into fulfilling roles in the playcentres. Catherine speaks of new parents joining:

For the new mums, it’s something we do – we put them in the kitchen, because it’s a familiar area …you feel you’re contributing. You may be a bit nervous about being out [at the tables] and discussing with the kids, so it’s like a safe area for new people to start in.

Wendy shared that when she began leading the music she didn’t think she was ready for it, however support was there, she gained confidence and “also felt more a part of the centre then”.

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Children, also, were allowed to become familiar with their playcentre and participants, before being expected to follow group rules and norms for behaviour. Clare speaks of when she first joined Kauri:

I didn’t push my children to do that [clear lunch boxes] for a long time. I waited until they did it, and it was months … And that was fine, because they were getting used to this whole new place …. Whether to put their lunch box away or not to me wasn’t important and when they became more comfortable with the routine, they started, because they’d absorbed the rest of the stuff about the centre.

Summary

Table 1 and Table 2 below summarise the findings for the environmental and social facets, showing how the physical and historical context along with the social context influences practices and can be seen in the assumptions and beliefs underpinning these practices.

Table 1. Environmental Facets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXT</th>
<th>PRACTICE</th>
<th>TACIT ASSUMPTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Extensive indoor and outdoor play space. Free movement of educators and children throughout the session, limiting casual communication. Gathering together at morning-tea time. | Morning-tea time used as a time for adult conversation and for educators to regroup as a team. (Both playcentres) | Communication necessary  
  • between team members  
  • to feel part of a group  
  • for educators to interact with each other at a time that will not interrupt the flow of play. |
| Legislation for early childhood centres emphasises physical health and safety issues. | Kitchen facilities are separate from the play space, from which children can be excluded. (Rimu) | Some adults’ work requires separation from children. Children need protection so barriers are used. |
| Shape of building and lay out of tables and chairs required many educators to interact with children during morning-tea. | Educators placed strategically around morning-tea tables to act as models for singing and actions. (Rimu) | All adults present are in a teaching role. Combined efforts are a strength. |
| Historical educational emphasis on children aged three to five years. | Toddlers and infants remain the responsibility of their parent. (Both playcentres) | Toddlers require more care than older children: mostly met by parent. |
Table 2. Social Facets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXT</th>
<th>PRACTICE</th>
<th>TACIT ASSUMPTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socialising and eating are pleasurable activities</td>
<td>Children chose where to sit for morning tea, chat without adult intervention (at times), and help each other.</td>
<td>Playcentre is a place to make friends and build relationships. Children can be trusted to nurture their own friendships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A mid-session snack where adults and children sit down to eat, reflecting a common practice in society.</td>
<td>Children were allowed to help themselves to food, and leave the table when finished.</td>
<td>Independence is valuable and should be encouraged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All parents of enrolled children rostered on to the supervision team for one day a week.</td>
<td>All adults on session take turns at tasks and leadership roles. Different educators on each day of the week.</td>
<td>Teamwork is effective and allows everyone to feel a valued member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continual flow of families in and out of each playcentre. Emergent leadership.</td>
<td>Adults and children are introduced to routines, at their own pace, with them accepting responsibility when appropriate for them.</td>
<td>Belonging is necessary before contribution can be made. Adults and children need to feel comfortable, before they can take on wider roles with others.</td>
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Discussion

Morning-tea at the playcentres had a different emphasis. At Rimu, it was quite a formal occasion that needed planning for, while at Kauri it was brief and informal with an emphasis on it as a social relaxing time for children and adults. In this paper two facets of the organisational culture of the playcentres were examined, providing evidence of current practices, influences on these practices, and links to suggested underlying beliefs. An analysis such as this allowed activities, which initially appeared random and unconnected, to be seen as manifestations of an underlying value system. Both similarities and differences in the tacit assumptions of each playcentre became evident, influencing practices and attitudes of the members.

While the existence of a group morning-tea alludes to the belief of social community, children in both centres were generally encouraged in ways of independence, rather than interdependence (Gonzalez-Mena, 2003). Educators defined their morning-teas as a ‘time together as a whole group’ however much of the children’s involvement was as individuals. This assumption of individualism was viewed by those in the centres as desirable. The national curriculum *Te Whaariki* encourages enhanced relationships between children and expects educators to play an active role in building a sense of responsibility to the group. However, in the current study, while the educators spoke of
a group ethic, their practice encouraged individualism. As with McLeod’s (2002) research the educators’ espoused beliefs and their practices were not congruent.

At Rimu the practice of including the toddlers in highchairs as part of the main group follows current ideas of socio-cultural learning, while at Kauri for some toddlers it was not envisaged that they were ready to join in, in this way. Research by McLeod (2002) and Hatherly (1997) concluded that teachers’ practices were strongly influenced by their views of children. This finding is similar to the way in which the educators in this study viewed the toddlers at Kauri based on historical Playcentre beliefs, where the responsibility for them lay, and the accepted belief that the priority for the toddlers at morning-tea was physical care, rather than social learning.

In both centres the educators role-modelled the ways in which they expected children to learn the ways of the centre. New parents were empowered to take part as educators of their own and others’ children when they were comfortable in the centre. Similarly, as children became familiar with their playcentre, and had built up a sense of belonging, it was expected that they took more of a role in caring for themselves. Goldman’s (1998) findings showed positive results for children when their learning was facilitated through educators who experienced the same ethos. Working collaboratively, and relying on other educators as part of a team both valued all educators and provided a climate for the sharing of goals for children. The relationship between educators was structured for effective learning for children (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

As new educators took more of a role in each playcentre, others adopted a lesser role to enable this to happen. This “community reproduction” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 56) is more than newcomers learning about and through their roles as participants. The changing participation requires consideration of roles, as newcomers become old timers, apprentices become masters, and the rich, diverse relationships that support this. This emergent leadership (Goldschmidt, 1998) enabled the gradual, but continual, turnover of educators in the playcentre without affecting the learning for children.

Each early childhood centre can be termed a community with members mutually engaged in educational practices. Through joint participation, members develop shared meanings and goals which are negotiated by them and which connect them to each other. The ways of the organisational culture are learned and inculcated from the time new members join and are subject to continual reappraisal (Staessens, 1993). The organisational culture of an early childhood centre is of importance, because it forms an environment within which the child learns. The young child learns to be a member of the early childhood community, through participating with the others who belong to that community. The socio-cultural premise that learning is a dimension of social life (Vygotsky, 1978) has as its basis that individual children’s development and learning must be understood within the social context. Organisational culture shapes the interactions between people and the practice through which new learning occurs.
Limitations

A major limitation of the research was the personal commitment in time and energy of the researcher. With the researcher being the main research instrument, the limitation became critical considering the research was undertaken on a part-time basis. The other substantial limitation was the possibility of selectivity of information by the researcher. A critical factor was the rapport with the participants that needed to be nurtured to determine the amount of access to information. With the adults this was able to be built rapidly, and based on their knowledge of the researcher’s playcentre background. Part way through the research, it became obvious that sufficient time had not been allowed for the children to become familiar with the researcher, and therefore the informal interviewing with children was minimal.

The five filters that guided the analysis in this research were a useful tool in the investigation of the organisation culture in an educational setting. A similar approach into research in early childhood services other than playcentre would provide a variety of insights into the characteristics of organisational culture in early childhood settings in New Zealand. The importance of the research is acknowledging that the organisational culture shapes how educators in early childhood settings behave, and therefore the experiences provided for children. Further research on this would make a useful contribution to the debate on what influences the quality of children’s learning environments.

The case study approach was ideal for searching out the peculiarities of each playcentre. However to reach the essence of a centre would require many hours in deep reflective discussion with participants, and consideration of the wholeness of the centre operation (e.g. see Hatherly, 1997). It must also be noted that because certain elements of the cultures of the centres were identified as they pertained to the morning tea routine, it cannot be assumed that these findings describe the whole organisational culture of each centre.

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Paulene has been involved in early years education for over 20 years as a Playcentre parent, educator, advisor, manager, and now as the course coordinator for Wellington Nannies College. Paulene is interested in the contexts in which young children learn, and completed her Master of Education with a thesis that explored the way in which the organisational culture of early childhood centres influences the learning experiences of the children. She was awarded the ChildForum New Researcher Award in 2004.