

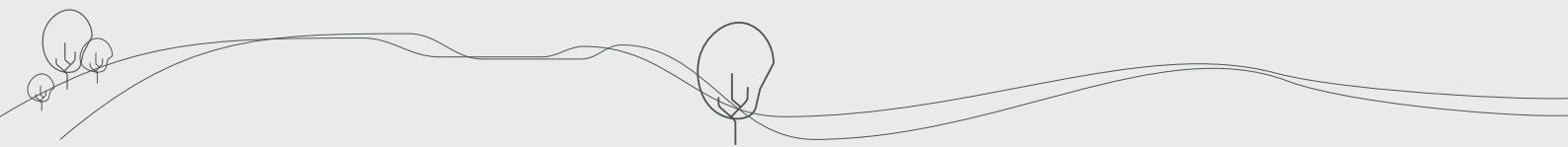


Judith Duncan and Carmen Dalli

Under-3-year-olds in kindergarten: children's experiences and teachers' practices

This project investigated the experiences of under-3-year-olds and teachers' practices in New Zealand kindergartens. Historically, kindergartens have provided an early childhood environment for 3–5-year-olds. As enrolments and waiting lists have dropped, kindergartens have opened their door to children under three years of age, taking them into an environment that was often structured for older children in a larger group setting.

We worked alongside kindergarten teachers to explore the impact of this change on 2-year-olds' learning experiences, and on teachers' practices generally. Together we identified factors that supported best practices for 2-year-olds, and macro-level factors that influence teachers' ability to provide positive learning experiences for children.





Project aims

The aims of the study were to:

- capture the current experiences of the children at kindergarten from as many perspectives as possible;
- reframe any discourses about under-3-year-olds that work to disadvantage the children or detract from the teachers' work satisfaction; and
- work alongside the teachers to identify macro-level factors that may need to be addressed to ensure a safe, high-quality educational experience for the 2-year-olds who attend kindergartens.

Research design

Using investigative qualitative research methods, we conducted case studies of 18 2-year-old children in four kindergartens, two in Dunedin and two in Wellington, over a two-year period. The kindergarten teachers reflected on the narrative observations of the case study children and their own teaching practices with the 2-year-olds in their kindergartens. Parents of the case study children were involved in reflective discussions of their child's narrative observations. The same case study teachers met with other teachers in their association for five cluster group meetings over the two years, to explore the research questions and to support best practice with 2-year-olds across their association's kindergartens. In addition, we also conducted a national survey of associations about their policies and strategic planning related to under-3-year-olds in kindergarten.

We structured our research questions and our investigations around the four levels of learning used in the early childhood curriculum document, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model. The four levels were:

- Level 1: The learner engaged with the learning environment.
Research question: What are the experiences of under-3-year-olds in the kindergarten setting?
- Level 2: The immediate learning environments and the relationships between them.
Research question: What factors within the kindergarten environment support positive experiences for the under-3-year-olds?
- Level 3: The adults' environment as it influences their capacity to care and educate.
Research question: What factors make for positive environments and practices for teachers when working with the under-3-year-olds in their kindergartens?
- Level 4: The nation's beliefs and values about children and early childhood care and education.
Research question: What macro factors influence the experiences of the under-3-year-olds in the kindergarten environment?

These four levels acted as "multiple lenses" (Fleer, 2002) through which we looked at the child in context, the teacher in context, and the kindergarten service in context.

Summary of findings

Through this project, together with the kindergarten teachers in Dunedin and Wellington, we have begun to build "new foundations" (Fleer, 2002): a foundation that has challenged the deficit model of a toddler and has celebrated the competent 2-year-old. We summarise these findings here under the three themes of being a 2-year-old at kindergarten, reframing discourses about 2-year-olds, and factors to be addressed to improve kindergarten experiences for children and maximise teachers' capacity to provide high-quality experiences.

Being a two year-old at kindergarten

Becoming a "kindy kid"

Two-year-olds quickly accepted and adopted the behaviours of "being a kindy kid", doing what was expected of them in their new environment. They fitted into the rules and routines of the environment, they built up skills and confidence, and approached social relationships with adults and other children with a variety of experience and enthusiasm.

A first timer or an old hand?

Two-year-olds who already had a sibling at kindergarten adjusted more smoothly to the environment than children who had no previous contact.

It helps to have a friend

Having a friend made a positive difference to how comfortable 2-year-olds felt at kindergarten and the amount of sustained interaction that occurred among peers. Likewise, children's previous experience of kindergarten influenced whether or not they were confident there and acquired the "community of practice" of the kindergarten smoothly.

Being new and being young

Many aspects of experience of being a 2-year-old at kindergarten can be summarised as: being new is tough, being young is tough, but being both new and young is doubly tough. In the physical environment these children faced challenges where only having longer legs would have helped (e.g., using swings, steps, furniture). In the social environment with peers and adults, they needed to learn the rules of the game. Some routines (such as mat time and afternoon tea time) were challenging learning for them. The presence of parents or other non-teaching adults was helpful in guiding children through these experiences.

Watch out, because I can't always tell you

Two-year-olds often used nonverbal forms of communication that were missed by teachers in the busy atmosphere of the programme. The teachers also lamented that they got only “moments with each of them” and that they lost the continuity of children’s experiences through lack of time to spend with individual children and get to know them.

Successful sustained interactions

These sustained interactions occurred between teachers and children when the teachers stationed themselves for a period of time in an area that they had observed the children were interested in. These shared moments were those that the teachers found the most rewarding.

Where are you? I'm here

Two-year-olds are small and kindergartens are big. Children liked to touch base with teachers and sought to be near them. We also observed that the 2-year-olds gravitated to the teacher and often needed to know where the teacher was in the environment.

Reframing discourses about two year-olds

I'm amazed at their competence!

Through the reflective discussions on the case study observations and in cluster group meetings teachers saw 2-year-olds in both familiar and new perspectives. They observed that children were challenged by the physical environment of the kindergarten, but were also highly competent in learning about their new environment—including the rules and routines that structured the sessions.

Frustrations and joys

Teachers discovered that their apprehension over accepting 2-year-olds into kindergarten sessions had abated as their experience with this age group grew. They provided lists of the joys of working with 2-year-olds. However, the joys did not diminish the concerns that teachers held about the current structural arrangements of kindergarten life, which did not always suit the demands of having younger, and increased numbers of, children in afternoon sessions and within mixed-age settings.

Factors to be addressed for children and teachers

1. Teachers wanted to create a high-quality environment for 2-year-olds and were clear about the factors (both physical and social) that produced this. In response to the physical size and language capacity of 2-year-olds teachers had made changes to both the kindergarten environment (its equipment and activities) and their pedagogical practices. Teachers saw changes at the level of interactions as harder to make and felt constrained by the lack of sufficient trained adults. “It all comes down to numbers” was a constant refrain.

2. Teachers felt constrained in their ability to provide one-to-one feedback to parents of 2-year-olds. Parents understood the challenges teachers faced in afternoon sessions; nonetheless, parents would have liked strategies consistent with a primary caregiver system to be in place for their child, particularly when children first started at kindergarten.
3. Teachers displayed all the key competencies of primary caregivers, but lacked the structural conditions that would enable them to operate as such.
4. “Caring and mothering routines” in a context of “not enough teachers” were seen as competing for teachers’ time with the provision of learning opportunities. This caused teachers to be ambivalent about the place of care routines in their teaching role, echoing similar views expressed by outside agencies (such as the Education Review Office).

Conclusions

We conclude that:

1. Changes in early childhood policy have resulted in a changed working context for kindergarten teachers and associations.
2. At the level of the individual kindergartens in our study, the macro policy context has placed demands on teachers that made them question their ability to deliver a high-quality programme under the current severe structural constraints in terms of ratios and time.
3. Relationships between the different learning environments of home and early childhood settings were constrained by ratios and time.
4. At the association level, there have been many and varied changes in policies and strategic planning. Putting the context of individual kindergartens against the background of association changes creates an overall picture in which kindergarten teaching can no longer be described as homogenous.

The major tension within this study was the realisation by the teachers that they could be doing things better. They would like to be able to provide the high-quality learning environment that they knew the children would benefit from. The teachers felt real frustration at knowing that, with smaller group sizes and more trained adults, they could provide the kinds of educational and care opportunities that they were trained to do, and that were the most rewarding for themselves and the children. While the teachers involved in this study were able to reflect, reconceptualise, and reframe their work with 2-year-olds, they were not able to directly change the structural factors they worked within. Group sizes, the trained teacher–child ratio, and the ratios of under- to over-3-year-olds worked against positive experiences for the 2-year-olds and were sources of the major frustrations in teachers’ work.



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

Change within individual kindergartens means that their traditional way of “doing early childhood” is shifting to incorporate practices that currently sit awkwardly with traditional staffing structures. The changes have put new demands on teachers who, from the evidence in our study, are, by and large, responding to the challenges of their new context with resilience, creativity, and determination. At the same time, the current demands stretch the teachers, who felt strongly that their current ratios of trained teachers to children were inadequate to allow them to do the quality of teaching they wanted to do.

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

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

Recommendations for future research

This study has explored teachers’ perspectives on their experience and their views of their practice. This has revealed a teaching role that is complex and demanding. It would be important for future research to explore

teachers’ practices as they are enacted. This will enable a fuller unpacking of the complexity of kindergarten teachers’ role.

In mixed-age kindergartens, the focus on 2-year-olds raised questions about the impact on the older children of changes to kindergarten sessions. There were also concerns about the consequences for 4-year-olds of starting at kindergarten at the age of two; these concerns warrant further investigation.

As the kindergarten national survey demonstrated, the context of the kindergartens is no longer homogeneous. In light of the present challenges to kindergartens continuing to be viable as a high-quality service, it would be useful to systematically research and evaluate the impact of other forms of diversification in addition to the introduction of 2-year-olds.

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Researchers



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She is an established researcher with over 12 years of research experience, predominantly using qualitative research methods in early childhood education settings, both in national and international contexts. Judith has a background of kindergarten teaching and lecturing in early childhood education. She is currently working on a variety of early childhood research projects that examine children’s and teachers’ experiences in early childhood settings.



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