PARENT CONCEPTIONS OF CHOICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Within the early childhood sector, there are moves towards an integrated approach to service development and delivery. There is evidence to suggest that this may not be universally satisfactory. It is argued that research to elicit parent conceptions about their choices of early childhood services is both necessary and timely, in order to develop a system that caters for the needs and expectations of families and young children. This project details the phenomenographic study aimed at generating new knowledge about parental choice of early childhood services.

KEYWORDS: ECEC services, parent choice, phenomenography

INTRODUCTION .

This paper provides an overview of an in-progress study designed to enhance knowledge and understanding of parent choice in relation to early childhood services. The study investigates the ways in which parents make their choices of early services and examines and interprets the meanings that they ascribe to those choices. Thus, this study will examine, in a descriptive fashion, the knowledge base upon which parents draw in making judgements about the early childhood services that they access for their young children.

Young children benefit from experiences that build on their life-world experiences. The experiences of young children, however, differ greatly and, as such, require flexibility of provision of early childhood education and care services. Different types of children's services provide young children with different types of experiences. It is typically viewed that parents select the types of services that their children attend. That parents of young children might make their choice of early childhood service based on different reasons than those perceived to be important by early childhood practitioners is a particular interest in this study. Coupled with this is an interest in what parents understand an early childhood service to be. Parents may not be able to choose their "ideal" or perceived most "effective" ECEC service, however, this study is driven by a desire to better understand the choices that parents make on behalf of their young children directs this proposed study.

The field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia is characterized by diversity and complexity. Whilst there is some similarity in service development and delivery for services under Commonwealth control,

there is substantial variation between states and territories in policy and funding. Such a system can be seen to be confusing for parents who are responsible for choosing early childhood environments for their young children.

The possible reframing of the public provision of services for young children is receiving much attention by both the state and national levels of governments in Australia (Commonwealth Government, 1999; Council of Australian Government (COAG) Child Care Working Group, 1995; Queensland Government, 2000). The promotion of the need for systemic reform and the development of more flexible and integrated services are also evident in the international arena (OECD, 2001). This study has developed as a concerned response to these recent policy initiatives, as the ways in which parents of young children choose early childhood services, as well as the reasons for their choices is absent from such reforms.

In this paper, four key areas in the international literature are used to highlight the contexts in which parents of young children choose early childhood services. They are: the social context, the political context, the quality context and the context for parents. These diverse yet interrelated contexts form the backcloth for the choices parents make for their children. Accordingly, Hayes, Neilsen-Hewett and Warton (1999) concur that the economic, demographic, ideological and historical influences on early childhood education and care services are complex and need to be examined, in order to ascertain the manner in which factors affect the provision of services for young children and their families.

Social context of Australian early childhood

Today, Australian society is more socially and culturally diverse than ever before. Demographically, the birth rate is presently the lowest ever recorded and life expectancy rates have increased, thus impacting on the age distribution within society (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002c). Socially, there is a decrease in family size and an increase in single parent and couple-only families (ABS, 2002b). Related to this is the steady increase of women participating in the workforce. Moreover, the economic climate has changed dramatically, with less wealth for the lower class than for the middle and upper classes. As a nation, Australians have become less dependant economically, on primary industries and natural resources and more heavily dependant upon service and telecommunication industries. Changes to the fabric of society, as we know it, have meant readjustment of workforce arrangements and a greater flexibility in working hours for many (OECD, 2001; Press & Hayes, 2000). These trends have a substantial impact upon parents who are choosing an early childhood service for their children.

Further, there is increasing diversity in family structures, with the number of single parent families being numerically greater than in any previous period (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002a). Closely linked to this is the dramatic increase of women participating in the workforce, whether out of necessity or by choice (ABS, 2002b). These factors have a direct impact on the ways for

which children are cared. More than ever before in Australian society, young children are experiencing an increase in non-parental forms of care (OECD, 2001).

Undoubtedly, the societal context is continually changing. The dilemma for those working in the field of early childhood education and care is the extent to which such change affects service provisions. Any examination of the early childhood field in which parent choice is made, cannot be separated from consideration of wider economic and political reform. The apparent permanence of out-of-home care and the profound change in the structural, cultural, and labour force characteristics of families, have become a part of the fabric of current society (Hayes & Watt, 1998; Goodfellow, 2001). The early childhood field is not a separate, autonomous entity. Rather, it is entwined with the agendas of the workforce, education and training. As society is undergoing continuous change, ECEC services intersect with the needs of families within the changing social context. An historical review of Australian ECEC confirms this view. In light of contemporary features of the family and demographic trends, parent choice of ECEC services for their children may be influenced by, and to some extent, complicated by, historical foundations of service provision as well as present needs and expectations.

The ways that the child and childhood are understood, within a particular society, influence the early childhood education and care that is provided for young children and their families within that context. Conceptions or understandings of early childhood environments are underpinned by beliefs about the young child and early childhood. That is to say, the way in which parents view childhood, may influence their choice of ECEC settings.

It is difficult to ascertain the predominant view of childhood in Australia. From an historical perspective, views of childhood have ranged from a focus on children in their own right to a view that children are part of a family context (Brennan, 1994; Cleverley & Phillips, 1990; James & Prout, 1997; Powell, 1990; Smart & Neale, 1999). In recent times, social policy has tended towards the latter, and the emphasis, therefore, has been on addressing the needs of parents participating in the workforce as well as assisting those families with children identified as "at risk" (OECD, 2001).

This study theorises childhood as a social phenomenon, which exists in a particular social context (Cleverley & Phillips, 1990; James & Prout, 1997). The context or social world of the child is diverse, complex and subject to continuous change. It is difficult to predict what the future will hold for young children. More recent work in this field has adopted a broader view of the child and childhood. The child has been understood to have surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities (Dahlberg, et al, 2002; Malaguzzi, 1993). Others have taken this notion further, with the view that children are co-constructors of knowledge and identity with other children and adults (Danby, 2001; Danby, Baker & Emmison, 2002; James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2001). Such constructions of childhood may impact the ECEC field, in childhood policy, service provision and education contexts. These constructions are pedagogy.

The period of early childhood may be seen as biologically determined. However, the way it is understood and conceptualised is socially determined. The view that continues to dominate western society, generally, is that young children are a unique social group and, as such, are an integral component of society (Brennan, 1999; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Penn, 1997). Childhood, then, can be viewed as a unique social phenomenon, which is, in turn, part of a social phenomenon of the family.

Family structures in OECD countries, generally speaking, have undergone a major structural change (OECD, 2001). The family structure impacts the way in which the child is perceived within the family context, as well as the way in which provisions for the young child are chosen. This includes the choice of ECEC services and it is the parents who are primarily responsible for making choices for the alternate socialisation and educational contexts for their children (OECD, 2001).

Regardless of the structure of the family, however diverse it may be or become, it is recognised across a wide range of literatures that the parents play an important role in the lives of their young children and in the provision of learning opportunities for their children (Dahlberg, et al., 2002; James, et al, 1998, Moss & Pence, 1994). It is not necessary for the family to be the sole provider of this environment (Moss & Petrie, 2002). The family, therefore, is but one of the contexts in which children grow and learn, and parents are responsible for the choice of other ECEC contexts.

Policy context

This study has been conceptualised within a period of reform within the Queensland early childhood education and care sector. When this research commenced in 2002, the Queensland Government had just released a policy document, *Queensland the Smart State. Education and Training Reforms for the Future* (Queensland Government, 2002), which emphasised the need to pay closer attention to consumer needs and expectations. In the international arena, there is also evidence of such a trend. The OECD (2001), for example, advocates the need to engage parents in policy and service developments. Whilst such a focus is applauded, the trend reflects a 'top-down' approach to policy reform, with limited consideration of parent views and experiences. The policy directions that are being witnessed are reflective of the dominant discourse of market theory within the wider societal context, which validates notions of parents as the consumers of early childhood services (Brennan, 1998). Within such a context, individual parents, as consumers, play the role of selecting the 'best' service/s for their child and family. A challenge to this prevailing discourse in the broader ECEC policy arena, is one in which there is an extension beyond individual choice to a different and more collective discourse, on of 'taking part' (Rizvi, 1997). This shift in focus, from the individual parent as the consumer, towards a notion of parent as participant in policy and service development, emphasises a vision of community, whereby collective decision-making and participatory citizenship are valued (Marginson, 1997). Such a vision may allow for a

range of different service provisions to be made available to young children and their families and for policy makers and parents to work together, in order to redress some of the assumptions about parent understandings and expectations.

The apparent diversity of service types in ECEC may be seen, on the face of it, to provide families with choice. However, families may be confronted with a complex, confusing and fragmented system. It is often difficult for parents to identify which service types suit their needs and those of their children and, indeed, what types of services are available to them. These complexities have developed from, and continue to proliferate within a policy context of fragmentation.

As mentioned earlier, initiatives have been implemented, in an attempt to improve the types and quality of childcare services in Australia. It is anticipated (by its designers), that the national system of accreditation for childcare centres will improve the quality of care received by children. However, Wangmann (1994), writing almost a decade ago, feared that national accreditation of early childhood professionals would further widen the gap between care and education by not mandating that kindergarten, preschool and early primary teachers be accredited also. The danger, therefore, is the possibility of establishing projects of massive social engineering, which will bring about standardisation and order.

Governments ostensibly recognise the expectations of service users' needs and there is evidence of support for better co-ordination of service for young children and their families (Commonwealth Government, 1999, Queensland Government, 2002). According to the OECD Country Notes Report (OECD, 2001), "from a pedagogical perspective more integration of care and education is necessary" (p.34). However, whilst different levels of government remain responsible for different types of services for young children and their families, this remains difficult.

Within the present social structure dramatic increases in the levels of service provision across the various sectors has occurred, particularly in the child care sector (ABS, 2002a). These changes, whilst improving the balance between the demand for places and the actual places available, have themselves led to problems associated with effective service delivery such as staffing qualifications and training and the level of service being provided. Such policy directions mark the terrain of contemporary ECEC. Strategies such as those under discussion and implementation in Queensland (Department of Families, 2000; Education Queensland, 2002), seek to develop a system that keeps pace with – and capitalises on – the rapid rate of social change. This highlights the ways in which government policy reforms in early childhood are influenced by the wider social context:

> The preparation of Queensland children for formal schooling should be appropriate to the needs of children of that age, flexible in meeting the requirements of families [particularly families in which all care-givers

work] and available, where possible, in the local community. (Queensland Government, 2002, p.1)

With the advent of reformist social policies, it can be seen that the corresponding guidelines may provide government bodies with ways of better regulating the early childhood field, however, as Grieshaber (2000) critiques, "certain ways of thinking about and constructing curriculum are excluded, therefore subtly regulating ways in which early childhood educators and parents view children and early childhood curricula" (p.3).

In fact, Moss and Petrie (2002) support a different stance, claiming that there is "the possibility of rethinking public provisions for children" (p.2), when stakeholders are adequately consulted. As such, understanding the different meanings that parents of young children attribute to ECEC services is inextricably linked to any reform that aims to provide better services for children and their families.

It is apparent that there is an identifiable deficit in the ECEC research area, that being the area of parent choice with regard to ECEC services and the reasons for the choices that are made. This is as yet an under-researched area of the ECEC policy and practice debate. This doctoral study will contribute to this knowledge, seeking to promote understanding about what types of services families seek and why they do so.

Quality context

The phenomenon of quality has emerged as a key issue in the early childhood field in recent times. Quality is not a neutral term. Quality is a constructed term with a particular constructed meaning. Early childhood education and care services regulate quality in particular ways. Concurring, Luke and Luke (2001), suggest that it is a socially constructed conceptualisation. The language of quality is the language of early childhood institutions as producers of specified outcomes. Alternatively, a different way of viewing young children and early childhood institutions, leads to a focus on making meaning. As such, the discourse of making meaning provides an opportunity to deepen understandings of pedagogy and practice and can be a guide to making judgements about the value of ECEC services.

The issue of quality is embedded in analysis of early childhood and early childhood institutions and the fabric of society in which the concept of quality exists (Grieshaber, 2000). It requires that early childhood practitioners and stakeholders reflect upon their practices and make informed decisions about the aim of their service. The ways in which children are understood may well influence the political and ethical choices that are made with regard to the public provision of services for them (Moss & Petrie, 2002). But, how is quality perceived by parents choosing ECEC services? To date this has been not been addressed. Early childhood care and education services have increasingly concerned themselves with issues relating directly to "quality". This study aims to redress the absence of parental perspectives on quality.

Alternative discourses of quality ask: How can quality be reconceptualized in light of diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives and contexts? As Dahlberg, et al.(2002) state:

> The concept and language of quality cannot accommodate issues such as diversity and multiple perspectives, contextual specificity and subjectivity. If we are to do that we must go beyond the concept of quality. A new concept is required, what we term the concept of making meaning. (p.6)

Within the field of early childhood, the discourse of making meaning can manifest itself in the construction and deepening understanding of early childhood institutions and their purposes and projects. In this instance, gaining an insight into how parents choose ECEC services and how they make meaning from such choices.

Both making meaning and quality desire to make sense of what is going on and to seek answers to the question of what is good work and how good work can be defined in early childhood institutions. The fundamental difference between the two terms is in the way that both discourses attempt to make sense and enquire into what is good work, and the methods that are used to construct this understanding. On the one hand, working within a discourse of quality, one may seek to understand this phenomenon in terms of value-free, technical choices and judgements. On the other hand, if one is concerned with the discourse of making meaning, understandings are contextual, reliant upon individual and shared experiences, critical reflection and dialogue. In adopting these discourses as a reference point, this study aims to investigate the different ways in which parents choosing ECEC services make meaning of the environments that they choose to access for their young children.

Parental context

As previously mentioned, parents are predominantly responsible for choosing the early childhood education and care services for their young children (Dahlberg et al., 2002; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Pence & Moss, 2002). That is not to say that the child has no role in the decision-making. Rather, it is the parent who is ultimately responsible for enrolling the young child at the service. The degree to which the child plays an active role in the decision may be dependent on factors such as the age of the child and the dominant view of the child within the family context. This directly relates to the way in which the child and childhood are understood within the wider social context (Dahlberg, et al, 2002, Moss & Petrie, 2002). Linked closely to this conceptualisation is the predominant view that early childhood institutions provide greater opportunities and exposure to relationships and could be viewed as complementary to the home environment (Morda, Kapsalakis & Clyde, 2000).

Parent responsibility to make choices is recognised in early childhood environments internationally (OECD, 2001; Economic Planning Advisory Commission [EPAC], 1996). Parents may have a number of choices,

between home-based and centre-based options. There can be practical considerations, which may include cost, availability, and flexibility of hours or location. There may be other fundamental differences relating to the measurable elements of quality, including resources and equipment, space availability, staff training levels, adult-child ratios and program or curriculum emphasis.

Within this array of factors, there has been limited research on parent choice, in relation to how they choose ECEC services for their young children. Indeed, much of the recent focus has investigated the participation of parents and the wider community (Galinsky, et al, 1990; Powell, 1989; Pugh, 1985, Vincent, 1993). To date the number of studies focusing specifically upon selection of services and parent choice remains small (Greenblat & Ochiltree, 1993; Rodd & Millikan, 1994; Tayler & Irvine, 2000; Tayler, 2001). The OECD Report, *Starting Strong* (2001), identified co-operation and engagement with families of children using ECEC services, as a common goal for ECEC service providers, across the range of participating OECD countries. This confirms the paucity of research focusing particularly on parent choice and conceptions of early childhood services, a paucity that this study will seek to redress.

More recently, in the OECD report (2001) it is argued that there is a need to foster a more participatory and democratic approach to 'engaging' parents in ECEC, presenting the following rationale in support of such claims:

> Parent engagement seeks to: a) build on parents unique knowledge about their children, fostering continuity of learning in the home; b) promote positive attitudes and behaviour towards children's learning; c) provide parents with information and referrals to other services; d) support parent and community empowerment. (OECD, 2001, p.10)

Within a more democratic and participative approach, considerable emphasis is placed on listening to parents. In Australia, as in other western countries, advocates of ECEC reconceptualisation argue that those involved in ECEC can learn to better understand parents, and meet their child and family needs. One way this can be achieved is by providing increased opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue (Hard, 1997). Pence and Goelman (1987), state that the voices of parents are strangely silent, in the majority of day care studies. As such, they advocate that a greater amount of attention be placed upon listening to parent views and expectations. This gives further impetus to this study of parent conceptions.

There has been limited research, to date, that has endeavoured to identify parent views and experiences of Australian ECEC services. Little is known about how parents understand the ideal or most effective early childhood service and how they make the choice of service/s for their young children. Given the gap in the body of literature concerning parent views and understandings, a study that focuses on parent understandings of ECEC services for their young children is both necessary and timely.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE STUDY

As mentioned previously, this study will investigate parent conceptions or understandings of early childhood service/s for their young children, and in doing so, it will examine their views. This is legitimitated by the present climate of reform within the ECEC sector. While there are many other associated issues, such as legislation, funding, infrastructure, and education and training agendas. A sharp focus on parent conceptions has been determined to ensure the feasibility of this study.

This study, examining parents' understandings and views of early childhood services, uses an innovative approach. It will be undertaken in an area of Queensland, where there are few ECEC services and where parents have limited choices. ECEC service providers in this location are aware of the need to be responsive to the community expectations. Existing policy can inhibit such endeavours.

Therefore, the central research question of this study is:
What are the qualitatively different ways in which parents of young children choose ECEC services?

In order to pursue this question, the study will also focus on three subsidiary questions:
1. What are parent conceptions of early childhood services?
2. What criteria do parents use in choosing ECEC services?
3. How can these understandings of parental conceptions of early childhood services inform the field of ECEC?

The main aim of this study is to investigate the different ways in which parents conceptualise the early childhood services they have chosen for their children. The central concern of this phenomenographic study is not merely the phenomenon of early childhood services, nor the parents who choose those early childhood services. Rather, it is concerned with the relationship between the two.

Such a focus, situated within the context of local issues, may shed light on important themes that are relevant to the local early childhood services utilised by the participants. Whilst the findings of this particular study may be unique to the chosen demographic location, sample and time, it is anticipated that the findings may stimulate further discussion that takes account of parental choice and expectation.

THE CASE FOR EMPLOYING A PHENOMENOGRAPHIC RESEARCH DESIGN

The focus of the study is the qualitatively different ways in which parents of young children choose ECEC services, within a specific demographic location. In any research, it is the nature of the research questions, as well as the purpose of the research, that determines the choice of methodology to be used in the study (Bowden, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This study is

concerned with more than parents simply describing the ECEC services. Rather, this study is about describing how parents make their choice of ECEC services,and as such, phenomenography, as both a theoretical approach and a methodology, will be used to frame the study.

Phenomenography aims to reveal and investigate the different ways in which people experience phenomena in their world (Bruce, 1996; Dahlgren, 1993; Dall'Alba, 1996; Marton, 1996; Pramling, 1995). This study aims to uncover the variation in the way a particular group of parents understand their choice of early childhood services, and does not try to impose a pre-set interpretation of early childhood services. A phenomenographic research approach offers an insider perspective of early childhood services. The desire to obtain an "insider view", or as Marton (1981) describes, a "second-order perspective" (p.178), distinguishes this particular study from earlier research of parents and ECEC. Previous studies, have tended to use quantitative survey methods, to examine parent involvement, participation and engagement within ECEC services. The phenomenographic approach adopted in this study supports a deep approach to understanding the situated experiences of early childhood services by parents in ECEC. The selection of phenomenography, as the conceptual framework and methodology for this study, is based on its "goodness of fit" (Marton, 1981), as well as its appropriateness to the object of inquiry.

Phenomenography is a methodology that allows the researcher to "describe the major features of different ways a group of people relate to a phenomenon" (Bowden, 1994, p. 14). Phenomenography is "simply an attempt to capture the critical differences in how people experience and learn to experience the world" (Marton, 1996, p.187). Phenomenographic research is based upon ways in which a particular phenomenon is understood and, therefore, is seen to offer an appropriate means of investigating issues such as early childhood environments. Phenomenography is about describing experiences with the central assumption that there is variation in people's experiences of the same thing (Prosser & Trigwell, 1997). However, people may not conceive of this phenomenon in their own unique way, but rather, "a set of qualitatively different ways of understanding can be arrived at which have an internal logic [hierarchy]" (Booth, 1994, p. 3). Unlike other qualitative approaches to research, which focus on capturing the full richness of experience, phenomenography aims at reaching a highly specific level of description.

It follows, then, that the results of phenomenographic research can help to make the participants of the study, in particular, and the group under investigation, in general, "aware of this variation, its structure and relevance as part of the process of helping them experience the world in a different way" (Prosser & Trigwell, 1997, p.42). An intended outcome of this study is to inform early childhood educators' of parental conceptions and by expanding the awareness of teachers to the variation that exists in the way that parents conceptualise early childhood environments and make choices for young children.

This study assumes that the phenomenon of an early childhood service can be understood by parents in a number of ways. The aim of the present research is to identify and describe, on equal terms, the conceptions that parents have of early childhood environments. The underlying value of phenomenography as a research approach lies in its ability to make transparent these different conceptions of early childhood environments and the ways in which parents make choices on behalf of their children.

There are many advantages of using a phenomenographic approach, which are of particular significance to this particular study. Bruce (1996) maintains that phenomenography is able to:

- provide direct descriptions of a phenomenon;
- describe conceptions in a holistic and integrated way;
- capture a range of conceptions, due to its focus on variation in people's experiences;
- produce descriptions of conceptions which are useful in teaching and learning; and
- focus on groups of people, rather than on individuals (p.5).

From this description, it can be seen that this study of the range of conceptions relevant to the choice of early childhood environments by parents lends itself well to the use of phenomenography. Of utmost importance is the fact that, through this process, there exists a capacity for some level of generalisation. Also of importance is the consideration that all conceptions of a phenomenon need to be identified and described on equal terms. That is, one conception is not deemed to be more or less important than another.

The fundamental assumption of this study is that knowledge is constructed in a social and cultural context through interactions. Therefore, knowledge is seen to be context dependent (Blumer, 1969; Pramling, 1995; Vygotsky, 1962). Quite clearly, this position is subjectivist, relativistic and interactionist. Thus it involves phenomenographic and interpretive research. The foundation of phenomenography, according to Svensson (1997), is the description of conceptions that "describe knowledge in terms of the individual's understanding of something in terms of the meaning that something has to the individual" (p.163). From this point, it can be seen that knowledge is viewed as a product of interaction with the social and cultural context in which the participant exists (Blumer, 1969; Schwandt, 1998). Gerber (1994a) refers to this interaction with the social world as the participants' "personal experiences... reported from their personal perspectives" (p.27).

In phenomenography, the relationship between epistemological and ontological assumptions is very close. In fact the two are indistinguishable, because phenomenographic research is concerned with knowledge itself (Svensson, 1997). In support of this, Gerber (1994b) asserts that thinking, itself is fundamental to knowledge and, as such, conceptions are "perceived as representing knowledge of the world and have the character of products of thinking" (p.3). Therefore, knowledge itself may be expressed and described as conceptions that reflect the meanings and understandings of particular phenomena (Marton, 1981a; Svensson, 1997).

As is the case in other interpretive approaches, in phenomenography knowledge is dependent upon experience to which thought is directed; that is, the social context. Thus, conceptions and knowledge are relational. It is argued that conceptions and knowledge are created through interaction with the external world (Gerber, 1994a;Svensson, 1997). Unlike phenomenology, to which phenomenography has often been closely compared, knowledge is seen to be dependent upon context and perspective (Svensson, 1997). Fundamentally, the difference between phenomenography and phenomenology is that phenomenological questions are directed towards the essences of experiences (Dall'Alba, 1996; Hasselgren & Beach, 1997, p.199). In direct contrast, phenomenography is not concerned with the commonalities or essences of experiences, but with the qualitatively different ways in which a phenomenon is experiences, conceptualised, or understood (Dall'Alba, 1996; Hasselgren & Beach, 1997).

This phenomenographic study examines the 'world as experienced' and, using qualitative techniques, attempts to "see the world through the eyes of people in the world" (Burns, 1994, p.71). It does not try to describe things as they are, but aims to characterise how they appear to people and attempts to learn about people's experience of a phenomenon (Marton, 1988b). Phenomenographers do not try to look into peoples' minds, but rather, attempt to describe their perceptual worlds (Johansson, Marton and Svensson, 1985). This is motivated specifically by the aim of describing conceptions, and is arrived at by explorative forms of data collection and the interpretative, intuitive character of the analysis of data (Svensson, 1994; 1995).

Specifically, the present study focuses on describing the different ways in which parents of young children experience and understand early childhood environments. This research will attempt to reveal a variation in the conceptions of early childhood environments held by parents of young children. In reporting parents' conceptions, this research utilises the second order perspective to report what parents' implicit conceptions of early childhood environments are in relation to 'authorised' or explicit conceptions of early childhood environments. By linking the first order perspective of explicit theory (the literature reported in Chapter Two) and the second order perspective of implicit theory (the research data), the research highlights the complementary or conflicting relationship between the two perspectives. Thus, in this study, parents' conceptions of early childhood environments are considered central to the manner in which parents apply their beliefs to their practical decision-making regarding placement/s for their young children. In arriving at the parents' conceptions of early childhood environments, this research assumes that conceptions may be revealed through eliciting rich descriptions from the research participants, of the phenomenon of early childhood environments.

Once the goals of the study have been established, in this case, to understand the different ways in which parents conceive of an effective early childhood environment, it is necessary to collect the relevant data, which forms the basis of the second phase of this study. While there are several

methods of data collection used in the phenomenographic approach, the most commonly used format is a series of rather informal, semi-structured interviews. It is the interview that will be the data collection method of this study. In the interview, questions are asked about a specific case or situation. Further questions and lines of thinking are explored from the responses gained from the interviewee, with the interviewer showing extreme care to avoid leading the interviewee from responding in a particular way. That is, the interviewer must not allow her personal biases to impinge upon the natural flow of ideas from the interviewee. The phenomenographic interview is a specialised form of interview in which the researcher attempts to see how the phenomenon appears to the interviewee, and is not an attempt to enter into the mind of the interviewee.

In relation to this specific study, the main purpose is to identify parent's understandings of early childhood environments. The review of related literature recognised that there are some differences in the views held by service providers and those of the service users, in this case, parents.

It is difficult to decide upon the exact sample size necessary for a phenomenographic study. According to Dahlgren (1993), ten to twelve participants may be sufficient to elicit the limited number of qualitatively different conceptions of a phenomenon. However, Bowden (2000) eludes to a figure of twenty as being an effective sample size. In this research, it is necessary to continue interviewing until no 'new' conceptions are uttered by participants. This research will follow a well-established tradition in qualitative research, of working with smaller numbers of participants to explore the interview data in more depth.

The sampling rationale most suited to phenomenography is contextual. Researchers need to circumscribe the group of people which best represents those under investigation, that as great an internal variation as possible is captured in the sample. Such an approach increases the probability of finding the full range of conceptions that exist in a given population.

The participants will be purposively selected on the basis of being representative of the four early childhood environments available in the local community. The participants will include parents who:
- utilise only one service;
- access more that one service;
- are representative of the geographical location.
These criteria are deemed appropriate to this study, due to the small geographical location under investigation.

The third phase of this study is the analysis of the data. All interviews will be transcribed in full and then the transcripts will be subjected to rigorous phenomenographic analysis, as developed and described by Marton (1986).

During this combination of processes of sorting and analysing, the researcher is looking for characteristics that clarify conceptions of the phenomenon. One is also attempting to construct the 'structurally significant differences' that will

allow relationships among the categories to be specified (Bruce, 1992). This refining process is iterative. Tesch (1987) maintains that this process does not "merely consist of a random division into smaller units", it involves "skilled perception and artful transformation by the researcher" (p.1). She identifies several elements that describe a successful qualitative data reduction process. These elements provide an overview of the processes involved in this study:

- The researcher captures what is most important, most prevalent, most essential in the thousands of words dealing with the object of the investigation;
- The data becomes distilled to its essence, rather than simply being diminished in volume;
- The process is methodical, systematic and goal-orientated; and
- The research outcomes lead to a result that others can accept as representing the data (Tesch, 1987, p.1).

The responses from the parents who participate in the study are pooled and analysed using phenomenographic techniques. The data is examined, in order to identify parent-defined early childhood environments. This process of analysis involves reading and rereading the transcripts in order to generate categories of description describing the variation in parents' conceptions of the phenomenon, that being early childhood environments. This variation is reduced to a limited set of categories that depict significant differences in ways of construing the phenomenon. These well-established and rigorous techniques are useful in delimiting the range of different conceptions of early childhood environments that may be held regarding the phenomenon, as well as a means of exploring the relations amongst these.

Whilst it is evident that this research is being conducted in a particular context and in a particular point in time, it is believed that the findings of this study may be applied beyond the specific context of this project. Some argue that qualitative research holds no true value beyond the relevance that it has on its immediate self. "Debate about the generalisability of qualitative research generally centres on the argument that generalisation is impossible because of the variability between agents and that the research can suggest nothing beyond itself" (Williams, 1998, p.9). However, qualitative research can and, indeed, does have relevance beyond its immediate self. This view is supported by Williams and May (1996), who argue that qualitative researchers may make "moderatum generalisations of the kind 'if X occurs in situation S, it is likely that in a situation resembling S, X may well occur in the future'" (p.79).

When examining the nature of social research, it can be argued that explanation and generalisation are indeed implicit. Williams (1998) states that, "if we do not accept the explanatory and generalisable nature of social research then we may render such research and the formulation of any social theory impossible or pointless" (p.10). Therefore, it is hoped that the findings of this study of parents' conceptions of early childhood environments in the Boyne Island/Tannum Sands area of Queensland, may be seen to be explanatory and applicable beyond the immediate group of parents involved in

the research. Such research may contribute to emerging debate on parent choice in the field of ECEC.

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