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Publication Details

Camilleri, P. J. & Kennedy, R. (1994). Educational issues for family day care: results of a South Australian survey. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 19 (3), 39-44.

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Educational issues for family day care: results of a South Australian survey

Abstract

The training of family day care providers has been piecemeal, informal and of questionable quality. Their training has not been a serious issue because of the widely held view that family day care is an extension of the 'mothering' skills of the provider. This view of family day care as a 'home away from home' and the perception that it is essentially an extension of the normal domestic duties of women has mitigated against the development of formalised training. The push towards better and more importantly formalised training for family day care providers has arisen through a variety of reasons, and principally from the care providers and their member associations. In South Australia the Care Providers Association undertook a survey on the training needs of providers and this paper discusses the major results of that survey.

Keywords

educational, australian, issues, survey, family, day, care, results, south

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Educational Issues for Family Day Care: Results of a South Australian Survey.

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The training of family day care providers has been piecemeal, informal and of questionable quality. Their training has not been a serious issue because of the widely held view that family day care is an extension of the 'mothering' skills of the provider. This view of family day care as a 'home away from home' and the perception that it is essentially an extension of the normal domestic duties of women has mitigated against the development of formalised training. The push towards better and more importantly formalised training for family day care providers has arisen through a variety of reasons, and principally from the care providers and their member associations. In South Australia the Care Providers Association undertook a survey on the training needs of providers and this paper discusses the major results of that survey.

Petrie (1991a & 1992) noted that there was a distinct lack of interest in family day care by early childhood academics. She commented that family day care was not seen or treated as a serious child care educational/training issue but basically as an extension of the 'mothering' skills of the care provider. This view of family day care as a 'home away from home' (Ochiltree & Greenblat, 1992) and the perception that it is essentially an extension of the normal domestic duties of women (Jones, 1987) has mitigated against the development of formalised training in the field.

The potential for training has slowly been recognised by tertiary institutions. For example, the Institute of Technical and Further Education in Canberra and the Swinburne University in Melbourne, each offer a certificate in home based child care. Similar packages have also been developed in Tasmania and in 1989 the NSW Family Day Care Association received funding from the Commonwealth Department of Community Services and Health to provide training for family day carers.

The push towards formalised training for family day care providers has arisen through a variety of reasons, but particularly because of the changing

nature of child care itself. This has been the result of family day care moving away from the 1970s notion of the 'day care mum' to the 'home based child care worker' of the 1980s (Comans, 1989, p. 4) and the 'self employed cottage industry' of the 1990s. Care providers and their organisations have recognised the importance of training and see more formalised training, leading to recognised qualifications as an appropriate strategy for improved status and a possible increase in remuneration.

The potential empowering aspects of family day care have been recognised by Petrie (1991a) in an important but long overdue feminist analysis of the possibilities of this program. She (1991a, p. 64) noted:

Family day care services have been criticised by feminists for reinforcing and perpetuating women's domesticity.

For many feminists this has led to a total ideological commitment to centre based care and a rejection of home based care. Petrie (1991a) has explained the inherent contradiction of family day care in that it offers one group of women (that is working mothers) the prospect of 'liberation' from the dominant ideologies of mothering while at the

same time another group is enmeshed in those same ideologies. The way out of this apparent paradox, she argues (1991a, p. 65), is through the provision of training programs that offer the potential to 'empower care providers'. It is through formal training programs that alternative and wider career options can be developed.

The South Australian survey

The Care Providers Association of South Australia (COSA) received a grant through the Training Consultative Committee of the Commonwealth Department for Health, Housing and Community Services in 1992 to undertake a survey of family day care providers' views on training.

COSA then administered a postal survey encompassing the whole care provider population of SA (n=1696 at time of posting) and included a questionnaire containing 37, mostly tick box questions and an invitation for further comments at the end. Approximately one-third of the questions requested information about the socio-demographic characteristics and work experiences of the providers. Another third covered details of the family day care services offered by the providers. The final group of questions sought information about the providers' training experiences and their views on training. Respondents were given two weeks to send their replies to COSA. (Reply paid envelopes were included with the questionnaires.) No follow up letters or prompts were sent to providers because of limited funds and because of the impossible task of identifying non-respondents, as respondents were anonymous. It is acknowledged follow up letters could have increased the survey's response rate (de Vaus, 1990).

Numerical data from the returned questionnaires was collated manually. A coding manual was developed from a 10% random sample of those questionnaires containing additional comments. The comments from all questionnaires were then also coded manually. 854 or 50.1% of the recipient care providers returned their questionnaires, fully or mostly completed. This constitutes a healthy response rate for a single contact mail survey and probably reflects the common interests of and issues affecting the population under study (de Vaus, 1990).

The survey design, administration, mail out, collection and collation of the data was mostly undertaken by COSA. It was only at the collating stage of the project that COSA sought assistance from the authors to write up the report on training needs. The work of care providers in initiating the project and undertaking such a large survey underscores the concern that COSA had about the issue of training.

The South Australian survey data was remarkably similar to that obtained from the national survey undertaken by Petrie (1991b) in relation to socio-demographic patterns. While the Petrie Report was comprehensive it did not investigate the views of providers or schemes on the issue of training, therefore we have concentrated here on describing the providers' views on training.

Providers' views on training

The respondent group was fairly evenly divided on whether there should be compulsory training for family day care providers after initial orientation to the scheme. 43.7% of the respondents thought 'yes', and 49.7% 'no' (6.8% did not reply).

When asked if they would consider staying in family day care in the future if they received 'recognised training' (as per questionnaire), 52.7% of the respondents said 'yes', 6.4% said 'no', and 4.6% did not respond. The remaining 36.3% said they were not sure. This is significant for a question that is biased towards an answer in the affirmative.

In response to another question with a bias towards an affirmative answer, 65.2% of the providers agreed that they would consider 'correspondence based training'. However 30.8% responded negatively, which again supports the conclusion that there was a sizeable group among the respondents for whom the availability or nature of training was not a concern.

When asked about preferred time for attending training courses, the providers responded as shown in Figure 1. (Some respondents indicated several options, the percentages represent responses rather than respondents.)

It is necessary to be cautious about inferences from a question that contains non mutually exclusive categories and allows more committed respondents

Figure 1 Respondents' preferred times for attendance at training courses

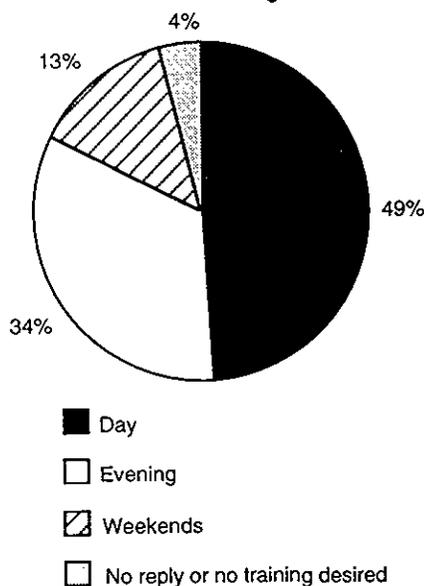


Figure 3 Factors which would motivate attendance at training

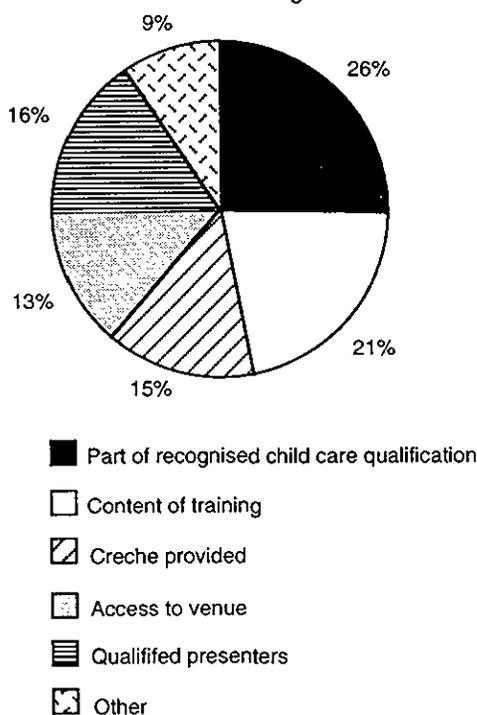
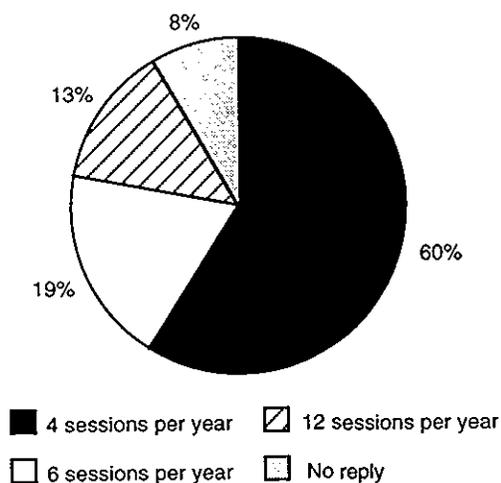


Figure 2 Respondents' desired frequency of training



When presented with a range of factors that might motivate them to attend training sessions, the providers responded as shown in Figure 3. The percentages shown represent responses rather than respondents.

Over one-quarter of the responses (26%) suggested that training be part of a recognised child care qualification.

When the providers were asked about what types of training they would prefer to attend, they responded as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 indicates that just under 60% of responses (as distinguished from respondents) favoured scheme based inservice training. This training is organised and run by the local family day care scheme. 23.6% of the responses suggested TAFE courses and 13.6% preferred a combination of inservice and TAFE training. This latter category was not prompted by the answer options provided on the questionnaire, but was indicated by multiple ticks to the options and therefore suggests a firm view among a number of respondents. The combined category was necessitated by the number of such comments elicited by the question.

to answer several times. Assuming that advocates of different responses negate each other's effects on the results, it would seem that there is a majority preference for day training.

Figure 2 displays the respondents' views on frequency of inservice training. It shows quite clearly that the majority of the providers (60%) preferred sessions at the rate of four per year. On the other hand, 32% of them indicated a preference for more frequent sessions.

Figure 4 Respondents' preferred types of training

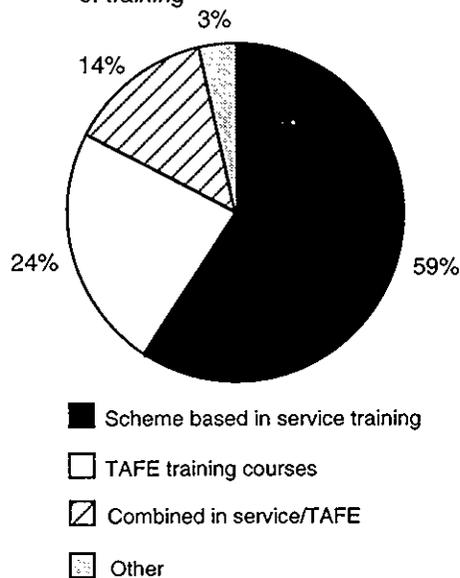
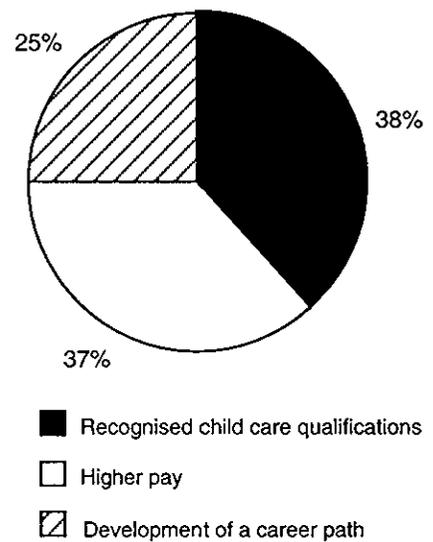


Figure 5 Respondents' views on profile boosters



The respondents, when given a choice about several options that in their view might lift the profile of family day care, selected as indicated in Figure 5.

Recognised qualifications and higher pay received almost equal support as profile boosters and nearly one-quarter of the remainder of the responses concerned career path development.

At the end of the questionnaire, providers were invited to make comments about their job or training and 46.1% of them did so, some at great length. The largest number of responses (15.2%) focused on the perceived inadequacy of pay rates for providers. Some respondents commented on the poor pay in relation to the importance of the job being undertaken by them. Others linked low pay with little incentive to train. The second main group of responses (13.9%) attested to the importance of structured in-depth training, largely to allow for the acquisition of professional qualifications/recognition or to help increase pay rates. Thus it appears that the pay issue may be a re-occurring theme in categories other than its own.

The perceived low status of family day care work received some attention (8.3%), with respondents stating that they were treated as second class

citizens and their parenting function undervalued by society.

Similar proportions of responses were grouped specifically around training issues. Some respondents advocated the need for basic training (8.2%) which would include orientation and occasional workshops on particular topics of importance (e.g. first aid training). Other respondents (8.1%) stressed the importance of particular training topics including first aid, behaviour management, communication skills (particularly with parents), and bookkeeping/taxation. A similar number clearly rejected any need for training. These responses tended to emphasise the importance of life and child rearing experiences in family day care and on the desirability of 'normal' family life rather than formal management for children in care. This view prevailed in many questionnaires that were not caught specifically in this coding category. Again the pay issue emerged as some responses in this category argued that pay rates could not justify an expectation that training was essential. Other respondents said that they were too busy to train.

About 6% of responses suggested that training might be appropriate under certain conditions and these mainly involved no interruption to the family

day care task and to pay, the provision of free creche services for the children being cared for (including carers' own if applicable) and pay increases resulting from qualifications gained. An even smaller number of responses (3.9%) commented that training should be optional and dependent on course content and the needs of individual providers. Responses that raised the training and payment issue (3.5%) linked course cost with recognised qualifications, increased pay and content of interest and importance.

5.1% of the responses stressed the providers' enjoyment of the work they were doing and the pride and satisfaction they had in such work.

Discussion

One definite conclusion that can be drawn from the results of this survey in relation to training is that family day care providers in South Australia are not a homogeneous group with respect to their training experiences or their views on training. It also appears that training, for many of them, is a matter inextricably linked with finances and status. This confirms points raised by Petrie (1991b).

At least 18% of the responding providers reported some past tertiary training experience. The provider group contains a mix of formally trained and untrained people. Their particular educational training is unknown, although the employment experience results suggest that for the majority—it was not training for child care. This, in combination with the pre-family day care employment data, does suggest that a number of providers had interrupted other careers before moving into family day care work.

The provider group is divided about training issues and perhaps more confused and anxious than some, because they have come relatively late to the training debate, and their livelihood and lifestyle are at stake. Some respondents see family day care as a professional service requiring training and providing a career path. This position was articulated by a respondent as follows:

We as family day care workers should have a recognised certificate of our own which would enable care providers to go on to study at a higher level if they (sic) wish.

Others view their services as an extension of their own home duties and are opposed to formalisation of

family day care through training. As one respondent said:

Family day care is a home based job and that's what the parents want. So why should we be 'over' trained when the majority of us do a really good job?

However, pay and perhaps status are concerns that seem to span the training divides in the provider group as does the opinion that experience with ones' own children is most important for success in family day care. One respondent presented a common view about the connection between pay and training:

If Family Day Care or CSO (South Australia's Children Services Office) believe caregivers should be better qualified then they will have to pay rates equivalent to those of people with the same qualifications in the work force.

There are some prevailing opinions among the respondents about the type, amount, cost, content and motivators that are, and would be relevant in any training offered to them. About half of the providers preferred day sessions, and approximately one-third preferred evening. About two-thirds would consider correspondence training, but such considerations are not likely to translate into action, especially in view of the core number of respondents who were not sympathetic to the notion of training at all (49.7% said 'no' to compulsory training). Again, about two-thirds of the providers thought that four training sessions a year would be appropriate. Even though there was a group interested in compulsory training (43.7%), and recognised qualifications (52.7% would stay in family day care if they received such qualifications), there is little support for training sessions occurring at the frequencies traditionally seen at the tertiary education level. About two-thirds of providers indicated an ability to pay a small contribution for each training session attended, but ability is not the same as willingness and one-third rejected the idea of any financial contribution.

Approximately one-quarter of the respondents expressed an interest in TAFE based training. Again, one-quarter claimed that they would be motivated to attend training that constituted part of a recognised child care qualification. For a slightly smaller percentage of care providers (16%, see figure 3), the qualifications of the training presenters were important as attendance motivators. It could be that

this figure derives from those interested in TAFE training, but comments on questionnaires suggest that it may reflect the providers' dissatisfaction with the quality of some of the inservice training they have experienced. Scheme based training appears to be the most favoured by the majority of respondents, but a significant number approved of combining TAFE courses with scheme inservice based programs (see figure 4).

The content of training programs attracted considerable attention from respondents. First aid, managing behaviour problems, communicating with parents and bookkeeping/taxation were topics specifically mentioned. Providers commented on the need for training content to be highly relevant to the demands of the family day care task. Scheme based training is more likely to achieve this level of relevance, than is formal training directed towards a general qualification.

From the analysis of the available data it would seem that about one-quarter of the respondent providers are seeking formal qualifications and perhaps a career path in child care. This number is not insignificant but is offset by the overall pattern of results that suggest that family day care providers in South Australia, on the whole, will not or cannot commit much time and money for training and will not tolerate training that dramatically modifies the nature of the family day care task as they know it or in any way threatens what they consider to be already inadequate pay rates.

Frankel (1991, p. 6) makes the point that:

many providers are highly committed to quality child care and are providing it successfully. Many of these providers are willing to upgrade their skills if they are given the opportunity.

The next step from the present study is to identify exactly what features characterise those who do wish to upgrade their skills, formal qualifications or less formal inservice training programs. The current results suggest that those desiring formal qualifications will need to be carefully introduced to the time demands of study. In addition, negotiated credit for some inservice training and the development of courses (e.g. TAFE) around time blocks which minimally disrupt family day care activities would assist these providers.

It is important to provide training access opportunities for those who want them. To do otherwise is to collude with the prevailing culture which is less than respectful of the significance of home based care. It may also be necessary, given Frankel's (1991) conclusions about the correlation between training quantity and family day care quality, to nudge those providers who oppose training into a position where material relevant to quality child care is seen to be interesting and useful. No doubt, and rightly so, the training offered will have to prove its worth before benefits will be acknowledged by some providers. However, both access and more positive beliefs about training must be achieved without damaging what is clearly a functional, essential and flexible community service.

The debate concerning the issue of certification of family day care is complex and multi-dimensional with many stakeholders. Should there be minimum qualifications necessary to do the task? If so what kind of qualifications? Who should accredit the training? How should it be accredited? What certificate should be provided? Is it portable and will it be recognised by others? Is it perhaps through training and certification that family day care will begin to receive recognition from the community for its immense value and importance in Australian society.

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Accepted for publication 22/4/94