Whose decision is it? Unpacking shared decision-making as a component of partnership in New Zealand early childhood education settings

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Despite the partnership rhetoric, early childhood education practitioners have found it difficult to establish a genuine partnership with parents, and this is in part due to the tensions in shared decision-making – one component of partnership. The aim of this study is to investigate approaches to mediating such tensions by teachers and parents. The study is a two-stage design. The pilot stage involved semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents from one kindergarten on their experiences with shared decision-making, which captured typical dilemmatic situations of shared decision-making. The main stage explored a sum total of the approaches to resolving the three dilemmatic situations captured in the pilot stage based on interviews with teachers and parents from two kindergartens and eight childcare centres. Data analysis generated three themes each of which form a continuum of mediatory dimension, and the three interrelated continua form a conceptual model that helps the practitioners to intentionalise and theorise their practice of shared decision-making in local contexts.
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Abstract

Despite the partnership rhetoric, early childhood education practitioners have found it difficult to establish a genuine partnership with parents, and this is in part due to the tensions in shared decision-making – one component of partnership. The aim of this study is to investigate approaches to mediating such tensions by teachers and parents. The study is a two-stage design. The pilot stage involved semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents from one kindergarten on their experiences with shared decision-making, which captured typical dilemmatic situations of shared decision-making. The main stage explored a sum total of the approaches to resolving the three dilemmatic situations captured in the pilot stage based on interviews with teachers and parents from two kindergartens and eight childcare centres. Data analysis generated three themes each of which form a continuum of mediatory dimension, and the three interrelated continua form a conceptual model that helps the practitioners to intentionalise and theorise their practice of shared decision-making in local contexts.

Key words: Shared decision-making, partnership, relationships, early childhood.

Introduction

Researchers have highlighted the importance of teacher-parent partnership (e.g., Epstein, 2001; Stonehouse & Gonzalez-Mena, 2004) which has been considered to be good practice (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). The importance of partnership is also evident in educational policies and legislations (Osher & Osher, 2002; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). However, a genuine partnership is difficult to establish (Murray, Curran, & Zellers, 2008). As a crucial component of partnership (Stonehouse & Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; McGrath, 2007; DEEWR, 2009), shared decision-making has been under-researched, especially in early childhood education (ECE) contexts.
Partnership and shared decision-making

Several theoretical perspectives support the notion of partnership. One perspective is continuity between family and the early childhood programme. It is argued that this shared approach, compared to school’s approach and parents’ approach, leads to optimal continuity (Powell, 1996). Another perspective is transformation of knowledge-power relationships which means teachers collaborate with parents to change the relationships between them (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2003). MacNaughton and Hughes maintained that partnership required a transforming approach ‘by devolving decisions about what and how children should learn’ (p. 269). More relevantly, partnership with parents/families is an important indicator of educational equity and equality, particularly for the ECE sector, for example, one of the eight key policy elements that support equitable access to quality ECE is ‘a strong and equal partnership with education’ (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, p.11).

A plethora of literature has provided an implied endorsement of shared decision-making as an indispensable component of partnership, in particular, many terms used for indicators of partnership by the researchers denote a certain level of shared decision-making. These terms include: equality and reciprocity between parents and professionals (Blue-Banning et al., 2004), respect and equality (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011), shared responsibilities (Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson, & Waniganayake, 2009), and mutual appreciation (MacDonald, 2015). All of these terms implicitly point to the importance of shared decision-making as a component of partnership between the teachers and parents.

In contrast with the above described implicit endorsement, many other researchers are more explicit in affirming that shared decision-making is an essential component of partnership. For example, Stonehouse and Gonzalez-Mena’s (2004) long list of the characteristics of partnership included shared decision-making. Flückiger, Jones, and Diamond (2012) emphasized that partnership occurred in a space where power and responsibility were shared. Hornby (2011) described partnership as the sharing of expertise and control to provide the optimum education for children. McGrath (2007) advocated to view parents as decision-makers in partnership, and Epstein (2010) defined shared decision-making as a process of partnership.

The importance of shared decision-making in partnership has also been foregrounded in the policy discourses. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009) clearly states:

In genuine partnerships, families and early childhood educators

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value each other’s knowledge of each child, ....communicate freely and respectfully with each other, share insights and perspectives about each child, and engage in shared decision-making’ (p. 12).

Similarly, one of the licensing criteria for early childhood education and care centres of New Zealand is that parents are provided with regular opportunities to ‘be involved in decision-making concerning their child’s learning’ (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 9).

In summary, there is a high level of consensus in the partnership discourses that shared decision-making is an important component of partnership.

Tensions in partnership building

Researchers have reported barriers and tensions with regard to building a genuine partnership (Banning et al., 2004; Keyes, 2000; Murray, et al., 2008). Murray, et al. (2008) observed that it is difficult to establish parent-teacher partnership despite the fact that many teachers are aware of the importance of partnership. Keyes (2000) described the negative feelings experienced by some teachers when working with families, including frustration, helplessness, and anger over conflicting beliefs. The reasons for these tensions have been found to be complex, for example, educators’ perception of themselves as experts (Price-Mitchell, 2009), and cultural differences in parents’ understanding of parent-teacher partnership in the best interest of a child (Tayler, 2006). As a result, genuine partnership has been found to be extremely rare in full-time early childhood centres (McGrath, 2007), and the efforts to develop collaborative partnerships between teachers and parents have been in vain in most instances (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

The aim and the pilot stage of the study

Although there is abundant literature reflecting the tensions in partnership, there is little literature that explores specific ways to address these tensions in specific components of partnership. Problematically, there is no research that investigates the process of shared decision-making. The study is aimed to address this research gap. The research question is: What are teachers’ and parents’ approaches to mediating the tensions in shared decision-making?

The present study is of a two-stage design – a pilot stage and a main stage. The pilot stage was designed to capture tensions in shared decision-making from which typical dilemmatic situations of shared decision-making were extracted as the focal points of the interview questions in the main stage. The main stage involved a larger sample and aimed to delineate the diversity of approaches mediating the tensions of shared decision-making. Ethics approval was granted by the author’s employing institution.

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The participants for the pilot stage were four qualified teachers (including one head teacher) and five parents from one public kindergarten located in a central North Island city of New Zealand. The individual interviews were conducted in November 2013 and each interview lasted for 15 to 30 minutes. The semi-structured interview question for both the teachers and parents was: ‘Could you share with me some of your experiences with the shared decision-making process in the kindergarten?’ Prompts were used to facilitate the participants’ responses to provide relevant, detailed, and in-depth information.

A General Inductive Approach (Thomas, 2006) was used to categorise the participants’ responses, which captured two relevant categories: power balancing and dilemmatic situation. Power balancing describes the varying nature of who makes the final decision when dissensus arises, as a teacher articulated, ‘It’s a very fine line,...it depends, something we just do, and something we do collaborate with parents, but there is something...has to be our decision.’ This was echoed by a parent, ‘A fine line - they actually give us the decisions to make...when your child is enrolled in kindy, they ask whether you want your child to be on the franchiser’s website, we get to make those decisions, but there is a very fine line between who does and who doesn’t make a decision.’

Dilemmatic situation can be classified into three types: (1) where the majority of parents disagree with the teachers, (2) where the parents disagree with each other, and (3) where one parent (or very few parents) does not agree with the majority of the parents. Each of the three types of dilemmatic situation is illustrated by a quote from a teacher or parent as below:

Mat time (Type 1 dilemma)

At the moment we research our mat times, and we found about how detrimental mat times can be to the children as well for the staff, ...but I think a lot of our parents will think that our job is just to prepare them for school, so they like mat times, ...they want their children to be able to sit on the mat before they go to the primary school. (Teacher)

Gunplay (Type 2 dilemma)

Some of the parents are very anti-gunplay, they want us to ban the gunplay in the centre, but a lot of our children come from families that go hunting and fishing, so they have guns in their houses, they go hunting with dad, they know guns, so keeping with what they know from home in this environment... (Teacher)

Fairy tale books (Type 3 dilemma)
You are not going to please everybody. Individual parents would just think about their own child rather than the whole group...we got a mum who does not like fairy tales, she believes that fairy tale books are not good for her daughter, and she even asks teachers to remove all the fairy tale books.

(Parent)

The above dilemmatic situations have three common features: (1) They affect the children’s learning, (2) They involve dissensus (widespread dissent), and (3) They require a solution.

The main stage data collection and findings

The sample for the main stage included participants from the same city as the initial stage. Three criteria were used to select early childhood settings. First, the setting received a ‘well placed’ or ‘very well placed’ in its latest review report by the Education Review Office, which means that the setting is well placed or very well placed to promote positive learning outcomes for children (Education Review Office, 2015). Second, the setting’s manager or head teacher is able to attend the interview. Third, the manager or head teacher is able to nominate a qualified teacher who has worked in the setting for at least three years and a parent whose child has attended the setting for at least six months. Consequently, ten ECE settings (two kindergartens and eight childcare centres) were selected, and the interview participants included ten managers or head teachers, ten qualified teachers, and ten parents.

The individual interviews were conducted in the premises of the settings during the period March to May 2015. Three interview questions for both the teachers and the parents addressed three dilemmatic situations derived from the initial stage:

1. In an early childhood setting, many parents want to have more, and longer mat time for the children. The teachers disagree. What would be your solution?
2. In an early childhood setting, some parents are anti-guns and want the setting to ban the gunplay. The teachers disagree. What would be your solution?
3. In an early childhood setting, one parent does not like fairy tales and wants the setting to remove all the fairy tale books. The teachers disagree. What would be your solution?

Glaser’s (1978) three-stage coding technique for the grounded theory was used to identify themes and categories and the relationships between them, and the analysis of participants’ responses to the three dilemmatic situations altogether generated three themes: communication, decision-making rule, and power balancing, and each theme included several categories as detailed
Theme 1: Communication

The teachers’ solutions to shared decision-making dilemmas started with a communication process that was driven by one or more of the three categories of purpose – shared-understanding, unpacking, and assimilating.

Shared-understanding

The communication process was aimed for shared-understanding between the teachers and the parents. Communication led to the teachers better understanding the parents’ position, as a teacher described, ‘The mom says that Jonathan’s dad is a hunter and the boy grows up with guns, you know those sort of things that make gun play more understandable.’

The communication process also helped the parents understand the setting’s position, as a teacher described,

You know we tell the parents that, in the centre, we have right from the babies to five year olds, and some might have concentration strengths to sit and listen, whereas some children always love to run or they always struggle to sit down for mat times, five minutes is maximum for some children to sit down, after which they just get up and go...

Unpacking

The teachers wanted to find out why the parents were taking a particular stand on an issue, as a teacher described,

I think it’s trying to unpack from the parents exactly what they... firstly trying to find out from the parents what is exactly their wanting as such in the times. I would have a chat with these particular parents, bring them in, trying kind of get their way of thinking and in what sense they think longer mat time would benefit their child.

Assimilating

The teachers wanted to persuade or dissuade the parents, that is, assimilate the parents’ thinking into the teachers’, as a teacher stated explicitly, ‘I’m just thinking that we possibly talk to the parent and see if we could try and change their mind.’

The teachers reported a number of ways to assimilate parents’ thinking,
drawing on research being a common strategy:

The solution in the end...bringing the latest research so that parents have a fuller understanding, because there is so much more research out there at the moment, and we can take what we need from...it’s being able to explain to parents, what is right for the centre and what is right for the children.

Another strategy was resorting to authority:

We actually got [a speaker] to come in and do a parent evening on the importance of play and outside play and how children of this age group learn, so the parents have the opportunity to change their thinking, because there is a lot of historical understanding of parents about school readiness...

A third strategy was relying on own professional knowledge:

You have to be upfront with the fairy, knowing about the pros and cons of fairy tales play within the centre, and take some effort and time to sit with the parent and talk to the parents about the pros and cons.

Theme 2: Decision-making rule

Each shared decision-making solution embedded one or more of the decision-making rules – individualisation, majority, equity, and practicality.

Individualisation

The rule was applied when a child was treated as an individual rather than a number, as a teacher illustrated,

We are always aware we make notes of who...you know John’s mum wants him to count to ten by the end of term, we just bring into normal play, we wouldn’t go and make it a part of definite mat time.

Majority

The democratic rule was applied to resolve dissensus among parents, as a parent observed, ‘I think it comes down to the numbers of parents that wanted that, if it is majority I think they should at least consider that’.

The teachers reported strategies to determine a majority, and one was bringing the matter to the parent committee meeting, as a teacher
elaborated:

This is the type of the matter I will bring to the committee meeting, and then we will just have the old fashion vote on that and we have a majority rule, so we could be...I think we have 12 committee members now, if we see seven committee members say yes we want a longer mat time, and five no, then we would have to go with the majority.

Another strategy was surveying the parents, as a parent illustrated:

In that situation I think the centre would probably have to survey the parents to find out what the majority opinion is, I think if the majority of parents believe that it should be banned.

Equity

A final decision should be reasonable and equitable, as a teacher illuminated, ‘There needs to be a lot of consultation and information sharing and collaboration on the way to that, ultimately it has to be an informed and equitable decision.’ A parent stressed, ‘I want a reasoned, intelligent response from the teachers and administration, and if they can give me a reasoned and intelligent response to my disagreement, I’m quite happy to agree or disagree.’

Practicality

A solution should be doable, as a teacher explained,

I guess...it kind of just needs to happen, and the staff actually can make that happen as well, whether they can actually execute that effectively, because it might be just an idea, or ideally I would like my child to have longer mat time but maybe that’s not practical....

Theme 3: Power balancing

All solutions featured one of the three orientations of power balancing: parent-orientated, compromise, and teacher-orientated.

Parent-orientated

The power balance leaned towards the parents. A setting manager described their decision-making as ‘very democratic’, and elaborated:

In the end it’s always about keeping the parents happy and what they think is best for their child...If parents are unhappy with something, then it goes to the parent committee, the committee will
probably decide that we should listen to parents, if they are not happy, then parents have the final say I think.

Compromising

The teachers described ways to reach a compromise, and a main way was setting restrictions, rules and conditions, as a teacher exemplified,

> The gunplay is fine but there needs to have rules and regulations around that sort of things...you know license producing license...or build a little gun cabinet, children put them safely in the gun cabinet after their play.

Another way was providing adjustments, alternatives, or remedies, as a teacher described, ‘I would say I’m sorry what we can do is to just make sure that the teachers do not read those fairy tales to your child, and we will make a note of that, inform the teacher of that, but we wouldn’t remove all the books.’ A parent described, ‘You could I suppose modulate the games, let’s go pig hunting or let’s go pigeon hunting you know, hunting for animals, and control the game within a certain period of time.’

Teacher-orientated

The power balance leaned towards the teachers. Several grounds for the teacher-orientated power balancing were reported, with one being the organisation's philosophy, as a teacher articulated,

> We can’t meet every demand, [laugh] at the end of the day what’s important is that we have philosophy that we all breed on, it’s a philosophy we shared with our families, when they enrolled we gave them philosophy, this is who we are and they were agreeing with that philosophy.

Another ground was that teachers’ professional decisions should prevail, as a teacher asserted: ‘We are the professional, we are the teacher, you know three years of study...we will listen to them, they won’t be here for long time, we are always here, we let them be part of ...but the final decision...no, this is why we are here.’ This was concurred with by a parent:

> The teachers are trained and that is what they are trained for, so I think it’s more important that they use their professional knowledge, I think if you got parents who come in with some knowledge that’s fantastic, but, if I have all the parents coming in and telling me how to do my job, that just devalues the profession.

A third ground was that the setting should play the role of administering
equity and fairness, as a parent stated,

Maybe that child isn’t exposed to fairy tales can’t be one rule for all children, and even if it’s me same...I wouldn’t ask them to remove that part of learning for every other child, no, the centre would have to draw the line.

In summary, each of the three themes constitutes one dimension of shared decision-making. The categories of each theme are conceptually continuous, and therefore, each theme can be seen as a continuum. Communication is the indispensable first step of resolving a shared decision-making dilemma which involves one or more intentions – shared-understanding, unpacking, and assimilating. Decision-making rule justifies a shared decision-making solution – individualisation, majority, equity, and practicality. Three orientations of power balancing signify the outcomes of shared decision-making – parent-orientated, compromising, and teacher-orientated. The three continuums are illustrated in the diagram below.

**Figure 1** Continuums of shared decision-making

**Discussion**

Communication is essential for all shared decision-making. When both teachers and parents have limited information, the communication process is more likely to aim for shared-understanding which is a characteristic of partnership (Powell, 1996; Epstein, 2010; MacDonald, 2015). When teachers have limited information on the parents’ position, the teachers’ intention is to unpack the issue, which may lead to the teachers changing their own ideas. When teachers have sufficient information to make an informed decision, their communication with parents is more likely to be one-way – to give information to the parents with a view to changing the parents’ ideas - assimilating the parents’ thinking into the teachers’. Differentiating such intentions of communication may increase teachers’ level of intentionality in practice.
The teachers chose to apply a particular decision-making rules to a particular shared decision-making situation. The degree of individualisation (treating a child as an individual rather than a number) can be affected by the capacity of an early childhood setting, for example, the staff/child ratio and other resources. The majority rule only applies when teachers have decided to leave the decision with parents. When the parents are unable to reach an agreement, the democratic majority rule seems to be least contentious. However, it is unresolved as to whether the majority rule applies at all times. Although there is general understanding of the standards of equity, the teachers and the parents can have different views on whether a solution is equitable in a particular situation. Whether a decision is practical or not may in some way depend on to what extent it is prioritised. Practicality can be created if a practice is considered to be a priority. All the decision-making rules are subject to teachers’ interpretations.

The power balancing between the teachers and the parents is a ‘fine line’ (Wanat, 2010). In reality, an ECE setting’s philosophy, and in particular, interpretation of the philosophy, may have an impact on the orientations of power balancing. For example, in New Zealand ECE settings, although ‘child-led’ is the currently prevailing philosophy, what child-led means is a matter of understanding. Child-led does not translate into parent-led, which means a parent-orientated approach to shared decision-making is not necessarily more legitimate than a teacher-orientated approach. Both teachers and parents may believe that their decision, rather than their counterpart’s, is in the best interest of the child. Depending on the context, there are situations where the power balancing has to be teacher-orientated and situations where the power balancing has to be parent-oriented. It is difficult to judge which power balancing orientation is more desirable without considering specific contexts.

The three dimensions of shared decision-making relate with each other dialectically (Figure 1). First, communication influences both decision-making rule and power balancing, for example, without communication, the teachers do not know whether a majority rule needs to apply. Also, a proper, thorough communication process may inform and affirm a power balancing orientation - when the communication is thorough and genuine, the parents may still feel happy even though the power balance does not lean toward them. Second, decision-making rule influences both communication and power balancing, for example, in a setting where both teachers and parents are used to resorting to a majority rule, the thoroughness of communication might be reduced as the final decision is made by voting in anyway. Also, decision-making rules in a setting modulate the power balancing, for example, if the majority rule prevails in a setting, the power balancing is
obviously more parent-orientated. Third, power balancing influences both communication and decision-making rule, for example, the teachers’ disposition to retain the decision-making power may affect their purpose of communication with parents – they have the dialogues with the parents to persuade or dissuade the parents. Also, the orientation of power balancing may affect the choice of decision-making rules, for example, if the power balancing is more teacher-orientated, the practicality rule rather than majority rule tends to apply. Among the three dimensions, power balancing is a most salient indicator of the partnership nature of shared decision-making (Stonehouse & Gonzalez-Mena, 2004).

**Implication, limitation and future direction**

The study presents the multi-facets of shared decision-making, which alerts the practitioners to the complexities of one of the components of a genuine partnership. The study reverse-engineers the component and demonstrates to the practitioners that there are different choices involved in a shared decision-making process. The study is expected to help the practitioners acquire the kinds of hindsight, foresight and insight that are needed to achieve effective shared decision-making. In practice, one test of effective shared decision-making is how well the teachers deal with various shared decision-making dilemmas. One criterion for dealing with the dilemmas well is that the teacher has good perceptual and conceptual knowledge of the situation. The conceptual model formulated in this study has the potential to support teachers’ acquisition of such knowledge. With a sound understanding of the model, the teachers’ solution to the shared decision-making dilemmas will be more informed, intentional, and reflexive. Although the model is never intended to be a formula, it provides teachers with a range of options in different situations. The model helps the practitioners to intentionalise and theorise their practice of shared decision-making in diverse local contexts. Perry and Gervasoni (2012) observed, in order for ‘partnerships to become a reality, early childhood educators need to engage with families and communities in ways that are relevant, meaningful and culturally appropriate’ (p. 5). The conceptual model helps determine what approaches to shared decision-making are ‘relevant, meaningful and culturally appropriate’.

The limitation of the study is inherent to its aim. The study aimed to reflect the variations of teachers’ and parents’ responses to the tensions in shared decision-making in different ECE settings. Consequently, the model focuses on a sum total of the perceptions and experiences of the teachers and parents, rather than the differences between the teachers and parents, or between different teachers or parents from different settings. The limitation offers an opportunity for future research where comparisons can be made
between the teachers and the parents, and between different teachers and parents from different types of settings.

Conclusion

As a component of partnership, shared decision-making in ECE settings involves tensions due to conflicts of values and beliefs between the teachers and parents, and among teachers and parents from different sociocultural backgrounds. To establish successful partnership, teachers need to understand these tensions and develop a solid repertoire of approaches to mediating them. The study deconstructs the shared decision-making process, and reveals three dimensions each of which includes conceptually continuous variations. The dialectical relationships between the three continuums, along with the variations of each continuum, form a model that incorporates the essential elements of shared decision-making. In particular, the model delineates the patterns of power balancing between the teachers and the parents in shared decision-making. All variations are context-bound and carry equal weight, and no variation of a continuum presides over others. Teachers should make use of all variations on the three continua according to local contexts. In conclusion, there is not a simple formulaic solution to the decision-making dilemmas. The described model has the potential to help teachers to resolve shared decision-making dilemmas with more intentionality and from a surer theoretical footing, which should optimise the opportunities to establish successful partnership with parents.

References


