



Partnerships in Learning: Linking children, families and early childhood services

Report prepared for the Blue Mountains City Council, the University of Western Sydney
and the Steering Committee Members by

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Section 1

Executive Summary

“From early child development to human development: The quality and capacity of our future population depends on what we do now to support early child development”

Fraser Mustard, (2005) Founder & Chair Emeritus Council for Early Child Development.

1.1 Project Overview

This research has been a collaborative enterprise between the Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) and the University of Western Sydney (UWS). The project has been jointly funded by both organisations and contributes to the mission of each. The mission of the BMCC is to work in partnership with its diverse communities to ensure local needs and wider responsibilities are met through high quality services and facilities and sound environmental management. One of the goals of the research team at UWS is to increase early childhood benefits for young children and their families by engaging in strategic community partnerships which foster that goal.

This project is intended as a pilot for a subsequent large study. The research findings are intended to inform this further research and facilitate the establishment of a community development strategy for families with young children in the Blue Mountains in a way which will contribute to achieving social sustainability. The current study provides a framework for considering early childhood access, equity and starting school developmental outcomes in one postcode area in the Blue Mountains, and mapping critical pathways to the achievement of good developmental outcomes for children on starting school. As such, this project itself has implications for BMCC’s early childhood development strategy whilst acting as a pilot for further research.

1.2 Aims of the Project

The aims of this research have been to:

- map the range of pathways which lead to participation in early childhood services in one area of the Blue Mountains (designated by Postcode 2780);
- identify the barriers to participation in early childhood services as experienced by parents and carers;
- identify the factors which have enabled participation in early childhood settings through licensing and accreditation data and
- relate the perceived skills and competencies of kindergarten children to their early childhood education experiences.

1.3 Research Questions

The questions for this research have directly flowed from the aims of the project. Specifically, the project has addressed the following questions:

- 1. What is the extent of children's participation in formal early childhood prior to school services in the Blue Mountains post code area 2780?*
- 2. What are parents' perceptions of the barriers and enablers of children's participation in these programs?*
- 3. How does participation in these early childhood services relate to parent and teacher perceptions of children's skills, competencies and development, at the commencement of formal schooling?*
- 4. What is the relationship between quality of the early childhood experience and children's skills, competencies and development on commencing school?*

1.4 Evidence Informing the Research Questions

A nation cannot rely on the quality of its schools and universities to development human capital. What happens to its children before they get to school may be more important. Early development powerfully affects performance in school and throughout life (*The Council for Early Childhood Development, 2005, p.1*). *is something left out of the first sentence? It doesn't make sense*

Attention to the years prior to starting school has reached unprecedented levels across most countries during the past decade. While previously the evidence around the importance of the early years has come predominantly from developmental psychology, powerful new evidence from the neurosciences and the economics of human capital formation have placed increased emphasis on the importance of the early years in relation to children's future development (Heckman, 2006; Shonkoff, 2006). In particular, the evidence informing the research questions focuses on the benefits of quality early childhood education:

- **For children from disadvantaged backgrounds.** A great deal of the research activity has highlighted the benefits to children from disadvantaged backgrounds accruing from gains in social and cognitive skills, particularly important at commencement of school, and that these beneficial educational effects persist through adolescence into adulthood (Heckman, 2006; Melhuish, 2004; Sutherland, 2000; Schweinhart et al., 1993). However, there is also strong evidence that participation in high quality early childhood programs benefits all children.
- **For school readiness.** The increased focus on the early years has also been strengthened by “an increased interest in school readiness, school reform and integrated comprehensive services for children and families prior to and during the early years of school” (Wangmann, 2006). This interest is seen in emphasis being placed on forging stronger links between the early years' services and school.
- **For children's development.** Research evidence suggests that of all the single strategy interventions, high quality child care is the most effective in improving

child outcomes and providing children with a chance to start school on a more equal footing with their more advantaged peers (Watson, 2005). While the research evidence is very clear concerning the benefits of high quality early childhood programs for young children, the evidence is also clear that poor quality programs can be detrimental to children's development (Vandell & Wolfe, 2002). This is particularly the case for children from disadvantaged family environments who are placed in double jeopardy by also attending poor quality early childhood services.

- Moreover previous research also indicates that parents tend to overestimate the quality of the service, and often experience difficulty in recognising many of the essential components of quality. The features of the program that parents rate the most highly are usually items to do with the personal quality of the staff such as warmth and affection. Parents also consider a safe and healthy environment to be very important. School readiness is also a feature valued by parents but overall is not rated as highly as the personal characteristics of caregivers (Raikes, 2005; National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, May 2006; Frank Porter Graham Child Development Centre, 1997).
- The move to build bridges between schools and prior to school services has led to a general consensus around the need for a continuum of inter-linked programs that include early education, child care and parenting supports as core services and the inclusion of health services. Schools are increasingly being seen as the ideal 'hub' or location for these services (Wangmann, 2006).
- Despite recognition of the importance of early childhood education, recent statistics (AIHW, 2003) indicate that approximately 50% of children across Australia have no experience of formal early childhood services. The reasons for this include the cost of care, location, service quality and the hours of care required (AIFS, 2003). Without a significant State Government injection of funds for pre-school services in NSW, this situation is unlikely to improve. The Sydney Morning Herald (28th December, 2006) citing the OECD Starting Strong Report, said that Australia was second lowest of 20 developed countries in their spending for early childhood care and education based on GDP. In fact Australia spends less than 0.1% of GDP on early childhood services.

It is this concern to ensure that all young children are benefiting from quality early childhood education that has driven this partnership project. Understanding the participation patterns in early childhood services and the barriers and facilitators to that involvement is a crucial first step to determining how best to enhance the early childhood education experiences of young children.

1.5 Research Design

- A multi-method design was employed within a qualitative paradigm enabling what Weisner (1999) has termed variable-based and person-centred approaches to be brought together. Qualitative research is used to investigate the processes associated with social events (Hittleman & Simon, 2006) and to describe, interpret, verify and evaluate these relative to the social context in which they are embedded (Lambert, 2003). Quantitative data collection allows the analysis of data to identify trends and test for statistical significance
- Data for this research were collected through the use of the following strategies and instruments:
 - Parent Questionnaire.*
 - Parent Focus Groups.*
 - Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS).*
 - Interview data from participating teachers.*
- Data were analysed to identify trends and patterns of responses applicable to the research questions underpinning the study. Statistical analyses of the questionnaire data were conducted using descriptive and parametric techniques. Qualitative analyses of the focus group and interview data were conducted using an interpretive inquiry method (Lambert, 2003).
- Prior to commencement of the research, approvals were obtained through the formal research ethics approval processes of the UWS Human Ethics Committee,

and the School Education Research Approval Process (SERAP) of the NSW Department of Education and Training.

- The schools selected for the research were located in the postcode 2780 area. This area was chosen because of its diversity of population and because five schools were located within its boundaries. Five schools (three NSW DET schools and two independent schools) supplied a sufficient cross section of the Blue Mountains population to give results which might be indicative of trends and issues and act as an effective pilot for further larger scale research.
- A communication campaign using public relations principles and practices was used to support the research process. Target audiences were defined, with objectives for each target audience built into a communication plan. Target audiences included participating school Principals, participating parents, Blue Mountains residents, Blue Mountains City Council senior staff and councilors, and professionals in the child and family service network

1.6 Key findings from the data

1.6.1 Quantitative Data.

The key findings from the quantitative data are as follows;

- Very high utilisation rate of early childhood services by the cohort (95.5%)
- Services most likely to be used were preschools (52.5%) followed by long day care (26.7%)
- Many families (58.2%) used more than one service with the combination most likely to be preschool and long day care
- Minimal use of playgroups by the cohort (10.7%)
- Parents rated the quality of care provided more on the basis of the personal characteristics of the staff

- Benefits (social and academic) to the child were the most common motivating factor for utilisation
- Many parents raised the cost and affordability of child care as an issue
- Many parents saw preschool experience as significant in preparing children for school

NOTE: These findings need to be read in the context of the demographic data which point to a cohort where 96.6% spoke English at home, where 53.9% lived in families where one adult worked and 77.5% lived in families with two adults. The extent to which this cohort is representative of the population living in the Blue Mountains needs to be determined.

1.6.2 Qualitative Data

Parents

In summary, the key findings from the focus groups with parents are as follows.

- All parents interviewed perceived that early childhood services, irrespective of the type of service accessed and the number of days children attended, were beneficial for transitioning to school.
- Additional comments from parents indicated that early childhood services, in particular preschools, should be made available for all children as they were thought to be an essential precursor to school.
- Cost was a significant factor in the number of days children attended services and in some cases, whether parents selected free playgroups alone or paid for preschool or long day care services.
- Transport was a major issue for parents who did not have access to a car, and concern was expressed over the state of the roads, the lack of footpaths and an inadequacy of other facilities such as Medical care, Post Office and Pharmacy in some parts of the 2780 postcode area.
- There were significant misgivings about the types of program run by services and a persistence of the traditional dichotomy between preschools as places of education and day care services as providers of little more than care.

- Quality was defined differently by different parents but generally parents perceived the quality of their early childhood setting as very high.
- Parents commented on the need for additional services to support them in the raising of their children.

Teachers

In summary the key findings of discussions with teachers in the schools were:

- That most children in their classes were socially well prepared for school and that this preparedness was generally attributed to their previous experience in early childhood services.
- That effective parenting and strong family backgrounds were also perceived to have played a part in preparing many of the children for school.
- That children from difficult family situations were more at risk than those with stable family lives.
- While most teachers focused on children's social skills and their ability to interact with peers rather than motor abilities and understandings about literacy and numeracy, they attributed print and number concepts development to their early childhood experiences.
- That most teachers believed in the importance of creating links between early childhood services and schools to support effective transitions to school for young children.
- That for some teachers forming their own opinion of the children in their classes based on their observations over several weeks is preferable to making assumptions based on early childhood reports.
- In the few situations where links between schools and early childhood services are established, these relationships are highly valued.
- That most teachers perceived a strong distinction between care and education programs and did not show an awareness of the education dimension in early childhood services other than preschool.

1.7 Conclusion and recommendations

This research was conducted as a pilot in one post-code area. The results are indicative of emerging issues and concerns.

- **Children's participation in early childhood services.** The results indicate that children's participation in formal and informal early childhood prior to school services, amongst the surveyed participants in the Blue Mountains post code area 2780 is high (95.5%), indeed considerably higher than the nation's average according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2005). Given the diversity of the population in the target postcode area in terms of socioeconomic status, work status and educational levels, the high participation rate and number of university (40.4%) and TAFE (23.6%) graduates appear to be anomalies. This is consistent however, with the findings that show that parents and most teachers consider early childhood services to be beneficial to young children as they transition to school, irrespective of the type of service accessed or the length of time across a week children attended the service.
- **The barriers to participation in early childhood services.** The barriers to access of early childhood services generally focus on issues related to transport, the high costs for families of early childhood education services, the availability of places, lack of information and misgivings about the value of early childhood experiences. These include false assumptions about the efficacy of preschool over long day care, accreditation of preschools and definitions of quality as it relates to care and education.
- **Factors which enable participation.** The enabling of full participation in early childhood services was generally linked to what were perceived as positive cost factors, flexibility and convenience.
- **Perceived skills and competencies of kindergarten children related to prior to school experiences.** Teachers' and parents' perceptions of children's desired skills, competencies and development, at the commencement of formal schooling

were similar in many respects. Certainly each were more concerned about children's social readiness for school than understandings of literacy and numeracy. In most cases teachers and parents alike attributed children's school readiness to their experiences prior to school, developed within early childhood services or the context of their families and homes.

- **Care/education dichotomy.** The care/education dichotomy continues to divide. Of considerable concern is the continuing perception that most early childhood services, other than preschools, offer little in the way of educational programs for children. Whilst it may be a false dichotomy, it persists in the mind of many parents, communities, school teachers and even amongst early childhood educators (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2004). It is based on an assumption that the educational requirements for preschools and long day care services differ.

Quality of early childhood settings. What has not been clearly identified in this study is the question of the relationship between the quality of children's early childhood experience and their skills, competencies and development on commencing school. Given that this was a relatively small pilot study we were not able to investigate the levels of quality in the early childhood programs using validated instruments.

1.8 Recommendations

The findings of this study together with the international research literature underpinning the project draw attention to the emerging issues and possibilities for the Blue Mountains Community. With this in mind the research team makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1:

That further research needs to be undertaken using the findings of this pilot study as a basis for more nuanced, comprehensive and complex studies. This would involve:

- **a comprehensive literature review**
- **refinement of research questions and instruments**
- **inclusion of assessment of quality of early childhood services using validated instruments**

- **Such studies may include:**
- **mapping all child and family services in the Blue Mountains region**
- **assessing their quality using a range of validated instruments designed for this purpose.**
- **identifying gaps in service provision**
- **documenting innovative practices and formation of relationships**
- **exploring the development of a strong transition to school program**
- **action research in sites of change and change management**

Recommendation 2:

That partnerships for research be formed between Blue Mountains City Council together with a research team from the University of Western Sydney and a number of research/funding partners such as DoCS and the DET, to develop an application for an ARC funded project.

Recommendation 3:

That a Community Education and Information Program about the value and importance of early childhood education and a range of services be developed and implemented across the Blue Mountains local government region.

Recommendation 4:

That consideration be given to the application of the AEDI in supporting social planning and teachers planning for children’s development.

Recommendation 5:

That as part of a social sustainability strategy, serious exploration of models of comprehensive early childhood systems be undertaken in the region. Such exploration would include attention to schools as community “Hubs”. A component of any integrated model needs to include consideration of speech services.

Recommendation 6:

That the findings of this study be used as a starting point to inform state and federal policy.

Section 2

Background to the Project

2.1 – Introduction

This research has been a collaborative endeavour between the Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) and the University of Western Sydney (UWS). The project has been jointly funded by both organisations and contributes to the mission of each. The mission of the BMCC is to work in partnership with its diverse communities to ensure local needs and wider responsibilities are met through high quality services and facilities and sound environmental management. One of the goals of the research team at UWS is to increase early childhood benefits for young children and their families by engaging in strategic community partnerships which foster that goal.

The project is a small scale study intended as a pilot for a subsequent larger study. The research findings are intended to inform this further research and facilitate the establishment of a community development strategy for families with young children in the Blue Mountains in a way which will contribute to achieving social sustainability. The current study provides a framework for considering early childhood access, equity and starting school developmental outcomes in one postcode area in the Blue Mountains, mapping critical pathways to the achievement of good developmental outcomes for children on starting school. As such, this project itself has implications for BMCCs early childhood development strategy whilst acting as a pilot for further research.

2.2 – Aims of the Project

The aims of this research have been to:

- map the range of pathways which lead to participation in early childhood services in one area of the Blue Mountains (designated by Postcode 2780);
- identify the barriers to participation in early childhood services as experienced by parents and carers;
- identify the factors which have enabled participation in early childhood settings through licensing and accreditation data and

- relate the perceived skills and competencies of kindergarten children to their early childhood education experiences.

As already noted, an additional aim was to enable the methodology, instruments and procedures to be trialled for a much larger study intended to explore the critical pathways to early childhood education throughout the entire area governed by Blue Mountains City Council.

2.3 – Research Questions

The questions for this research have directly flowed from the aims of the project (see Section 2.1). Specifically, the project has addressed the following questions:

- 1. What is the extent of children’s participation in formal early childhood prior to school services in the Blue Mountains post code area 2780?*
- 2. What are parent’s perceptions of the barriers and enablers of children’s participation in these programs?*
- 3. How does participation in these early childhood services relate to parent and teacher perceptions of children’s skills, competencies and development, at the commencement of formal schooling?*
- 4. What is the relationship between quality of the early childhood experience and children’s skills, competencies and development on commencing school?*

2.4 – Evidence Informing the Research Questions

2.4.1 Introduction

Increasing attention to the years prior to starting school has reached unprecedented levels across most countries during the past decade. While previously the evidence around the importance of the early years has come predominantly from developmental psychology, powerful new evidence from the neurosciences and the economics of human capital formation have placed increased emphasis on the importance of the early years in relation to children’s future development (Heckman, 2006; Shonkoff, 2006).

“From early child development to human development: The quality and capacity of our future population depends on what we do now to support early child development”

Mustard 2005 - Founder & Chair Emeritus Council for Early Child Development.

A great deal of the research activity has highlighted the benefits to children from disadvantaged backgrounds accruing from gains in social and cognitive skills, particularly important at commencement of school, and that these beneficial educational effects persist through adolescence into adulthood (Heckman, 2006; Melhuish, 2004; Sutherland, 2000; Schweinhart et al., 1993). However, there is also strong evidence that participation in high quality early childhood programs benefits all children.

“Our study showed that the quality of typical child care centres had long term effects on children’s development. In these community child care programs, higher quality care was associated with better developmental outcomes for children across the range of family circumstances”

Peisner-Feinberg et al., June 1999.

The increased focus on the early years has also been strengthened by “an increased interest in school readiness, school reform and integrated comprehensive services for children and families prior to and during the early years of school” (Wangmann, 2006,

p.6). This interest is seen in emphasis being placed on the need to forge stronger links between the early years' services and school.

A nation cannot rely on the quality of its schools and universities to develop human capital. What happens to its children before they get to school may be more important. Early development powerfully affects performance in school and throughout life (The Council for Early Childhood Development, 2005, p.1).

2.4.2 Summary of the international research

Research evidence clearly indicates that support for children in the early years has greater short and long term benefits than remedial or "second chance" interventions later in children's lives (Danziger & Waldfogel, 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Indeed, research into brain development has demonstrated the vital link between children's early experiences and their long term physical and mental health, learning and behaviour (Danziger & Waldfogel, 2000; Mustard, Cain & Bertrand, 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Poor experiences at this critical stage can result in antisocial behaviour, juvenile delinquency and mental health problems in later life (Tremblay, 1999 and Rutter et al., 1998 cited in Mustard et al., 2000). Danziger and Waldfogel (2000) also stress the importance of maternal health during these vital years and note how adverse social conditions such as smoking, substance abuse and folate deficiency can influence young children's development. Children who witness domestic or communal violence in the early years are also at risk of emotional and behavioural problems later in their lives.

In addition, whilst effective parenting has been identified as a defining factor in later life outcomes (Danziger & Waldfogel, 2000; Mustard et al., 2000), Currie and Thomas (1997) note that early interventions through the provision of quality preschool programs can have greater effect than interventions for older children and teenagers. Early childhood education therefore, is a critical factor. Not surprisingly, limited parenting and poor quality out of home programs can compromise children's development (Danziger & Waldfogel, 2000). For this reason, Melhuish (2004) believes that strong links between children's home experiences and early childhood educational experiences are essential to maximise children's opportunities. In some cases the benefits of early childhood provision can be mediated by parental background which reinforces the need for an appropriate balance between home and early childhood experiences. Melhuish (2004)

goes on to conclude that high quality early childhood programs with associated home visits seem to be most effective, especially for children under 3 years.

In studies conducted in England and Northern Ireland the findings indicated equivalent beneficial effects for part-time attendance and full-time attendance, but greater effects for every month of provision over two years of age (Melhuish, 2004). Consistently international reports suggest that all children over the age of three years benefit educationally and socially when participating in quality early childhood experiences (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2005), but these benefits are more pronounced for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, a study by Sylva et al. (2005) indicated that the effects of quality pre-school experiences on children's progress at the completion of the first year at school were greater than the effects of family influences, with the quality of the pre-school experience and number of months of attendance (but not necessarily the number of hours/days) being significant factors.

Studies in the United States have also found a relationship between the quality of the early childhood centre and children's cognitive and social development as they enter kindergarten and well into the second grade (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001 cited in Loeb, Fuller, Kagan & Carrol, 2004). This is similar to Canadian results (Mustard et al., 2000) which show a clear relationship between positive early childhood experiences and literacy and mathematical competency in later life. However, minimal data exist for the effects of other types of care (home based care, playgroups, occasional care), although a small study by Jackson (2004) indicates that supported playgroups can have positive outcomes for children whose families are marginalised.

2.4.3 The economic argument

While the traditional argument for investing in early childhood programs has been made on the grounds of fairness and equity, "there is another argument that can be made. It is based on economic efficiency. It is more powerful than the equity argument, because the gains from such investment can be quantified and they are large"
Heckman, 2006.

Many studies have recognised the long-term cost benefits of early childhood education and argue on this basis for changes in policy and increased funding for quality services in the early years as a preventative measure for the future (Belfield, 2004; Loeb et al., 2004; Mustard et al., 2000). These arguments are particularly powerful for children from disadvantaged environments. Of interest in this regard is the landmark High/Scope longitudinal study which investigated the effects of quality early childhood programs on children's development. The cost benefit analysis conducted at the 35 year follow up suggests that the savings were \$17 for every dollar spent, \$13 of which benefited the public rather than the participant (Schweinhart et al., 2003).

Belfield's (2004) report focuses on the economic benefits of early childhood education with respect to the school system. For example, he found that there are efficiency gains for schools in three important domains. Cost savings can result from:

1. reductions in special education classes,
2. reductions in the incidence of grade retention and
3. improvements in learning productivity within the classroom and school.

What does appear to be clear from the literature then, is that when quality early childhood education and care are offered to children whose educational outcomes are deemed to be at risk because of their minority status, poverty, family situation, mothers' education or illness, there are substantial short and long-lasting effects (Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal & Ramey, 2001). Maximising children's experiences during the early years is therefore critical and must be a priority for those providing services to young children and their families.

2.4.4 The importance of quality

Research evidence suggests that of all the single strategy interventions, high quality child care is the most effective in improving child outcomes and providing children with a chance to start school on a more equal footing to their more advantaged peers

Watson, 2005.

The critical factor in the provision of early childhood programs is quality. However, while the research evidence is very clear concerning the benefits of high quality early childhood programs for young children, the evidence is also clear that poor quality programs can be detrimental to children's development (Vandell & Wolfe, 2002). This is particularly the case for children from disadvantaged family environments who are placed in double jeopardy by also attending poor quality early childhood services.

(i) The process of defining quality

Quality in early childhood services is a multi-faceted concept. It is also “a relative concept based on values and beliefs” (Friendly et al., 2006, p.8). Although definitions of good quality child care may vary according to different perceptions of childhood and the purposes of child care provision, there has emerged a general consensus from the research literature that specific components are necessary to ensure program quality. These components can be grouped into two categories;

- The components that contribute to quality, and
- The components that determine quality (Wangmann, 1995).

The achievement of a good quality early childhood environment which supports children's development is dependent upon the interaction of the two dimensions (Press, 2006).

The components that contribute to quality are those that are usually dealt with in State licensing and regulations, for example, the training of staff, the ratio of staff to children and the size of groups.

The determining components include the way staff interact with children, the appropriateness of curricula and interactions with parents. Currently in Australia these components are part of the National Childcare Accreditation System.

The regulatory framework or the determining components provide the actual foundations of quality as they directly influence the determining components. For example, if staff have large groups of children to manage, their ability to engage in meaningful interactions with all children is limited.

(ii) Parents' perceptions of quality

Research around parents' perceptions of the quality of the services they are using for their child have consistently shown that parents tend to overestimate the quality of the service, and often experience difficulty in recognising many of the essential components of quality. The features of the program that parents rate the most highly are usually items to do with the personal qualities of staff such as warmth and affection. Parents also consider a safe and healthy environment to be very important. School readiness is also a feature valued by parents but overall is not rated as highly as the personal characteristics of caregivers (Raikes, 2005; National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, May 2006; Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, 1997).

(iii) NSW regulatory framework and the research evidence

The NSW licensing regulations do not reflect the findings of extensive research. This gap is seen in many of the regulations, for example, staff child ratios, size of groups and training of staff. For example, research recommends ratios of 1:3 for children under 2 years and a group size of 6 (NICHD, 1996). The NSW regulations require a 1:5 ratio and a group size of 10.

Children do better in centre-based environments when recommended standards regarding staff to child ratios, group size, and caregiver training are met. When these are not met, children do not fare as well
NICHD, 1999.

The presence of specialised staff training, particularly early childhood teacher training, has been shown to positively impact on the quality of education and care young children receive. While NSW requires a trained early childhood teacher in most settings, the regulations do not require any teacher with less than 30 children, only one teacher with less than 40 and two with less than 60. This means that many groups of children in child care and preschool settings in NSW are not staffed by qualified early childhood teachers.

A key feature of the NSW Licensing Regulation is that they require an early childhood program to be implemented in both preschool and centre based long day care services.

This means that parents can be assured of an early childhood program which ever setting their child attends.

It is important also to note that the accreditation system only applies to federally funded services. This means that preschools, being State funded, do not have an accreditation system.

2.4.5 Linking schools and prior to school services

For many children development and learning at school are hindered by the absence of comprehensive, multifaceted and integrated approaches to address barriers to learning and development. These barriers can arise from such circumstances as family difficulties, lack of community supports and poor health (Wangmann, 2006). Heckman (2006) argues that families, rather than schools, are the major sources of inequalities in children's performance in school.

What has emerged from the shift in focus towards integrated models has been a need for schools to build bridges with early years services in order to address barriers to learning
Halfon et al., 2004.

Halfon proposes five essential components for comprehensive early childhood systems;

- Access to health care for all children
- Enhanced prevention, identification and treatment services
- Support for child care
- Support for parents in their role as the prime educators of their children
- Support for families in their efforts to break the cycle of poverty and deal with other negative stressors

2.4.5 Shift to schools as 'Hubs'.

The move to build bridges between schools and prior to school services has led to a general consensus around the need for a continuum of inter-linked programs that include early education, child care and parenting supports as core services and the inclusion of

health services. Schools are increasingly being seen as the ideal ‘hub’ or location for these services (Wangmann, 2006).

The expectation is not that teachers in schools should take on additional responsibilities, but rather that schools should “transform their links with other community resources and change the way they operate so that a culture of learning permeates Australian society”
Edgar, 2001.

2.4.6 Concluding comments

Despite recognition of the importance of early childhood education however, recent statistics (AIHW, 2003) indicate that approximately 50% of children across Australia have no experience of formal early childhood services. The reasons for this include the cost of care, location, service quality and the hours of care required (AIFS, 2003). Without a significant State Government injection of funds for pre-school services in NSW, this situation is unlikely to improve. The Sydney Morning Herald (28th December, 2006) citing the OECD Starting Strong Report, said that Australia was second lowest of 20 developed countries in their spending for early childhood care and education based on GDP. In fact Australia spends less than 0.1% of GDP on early childhood services.

This presents a significant challenge for Australian society. Indeed, providing children with a healthy start to life and strengthening Australia’s social and economic fabric are two of the goals identified in the Federal Government’s National Research Priorities. National Priority 2: Promoting and maintaining good health. Furthermore, early childhood education has been identified as a major area of investigation by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), Australian Council for Children and Parenting (ACCAP) and the National Investment for the Early Years (NifEY). The National Agenda for Children which has been set by ACCAP and endorsed by the Federal government is also built on the strengthening research evidence of the importance of the early years on life trajectories and social and cognitive outcomes. The significance of the early childhood years has also been recognised by the University of Western Sydney in its focus on Children’s Futures.

It is this concern to ensure that all young children are benefiting from quality early childhood education that has driven this partnership project. Understanding the participation patterns in early childhood services and the barriers and facilitators to that involvement is a crucial first step to determining how best to enhance the early childhood education experiences of young children.

Section 3

Research Design — Methodology

3.1 – Research Design

A multi-method design was employed within a qualitative paradigm enabling what Weisner (1999) has termed variable-based and person-centred approaches to be brought together. Qualitative research is used to investigate the processes associated with social events (Hittleman & Simon, 2006) and to describe, interpret, verify and evaluate these relative to the social context in which they are embedded (Lambert, 2003). Quantitative data collection allows the analysis of data to identify trends and test for statistical significance. Quantitative approaches therefore offer what Creswell (1998) has called a wide-angle lens or distant panoramic shot while qualitative techniques, such as interviews, enable a close-up view. Where these approaches are used conjointly, such as in this study, critical factors can be identified and further explored allowing triangulation of the data and a deeper understanding of the issues being studied.

Data for this research were collected through the use of the following strategies and instruments:

- *Parent Questionnaire.* Through the use of a questionnaire, quantitative data were gathered to explore parents' perceptions of the various early childhood settings they had utilised, reasons for utilising (or not) services and the enablers or barriers to access and participation in these services (Questions 1-21, Appendix 6). The survey also provided opportunity for parents to expand on responses provided in the first part of the questionnaire (Questions 22-25, Appendix 6).
- *Parent Focus Groups.* Parents were also invited to participate in a focus group discussion of issues in relation to factors affecting their access to early childhood services (Appendix 8).
- *Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS).* This short questionnaire required parents to respond to items relating to their perceptions of their children's level of development across all domains. It is utilised to provide a measure of the child's skills and competencies on entering school. The PEDS is an American

scale which has been adapted for use in Australia by the Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.

- *Interview data from participating teachers.* Teachers were invited to discuss their perceptions of the way children settle into their kindergarten year at school, and to explore their perceptions of benefits obtained by children having early childhood experiences prior to school commencement. *Sample Questions for Teacher Focus Groups* (see Appendix 9) were used as triggers to help focus the thoughts of participants on the topic.

NOTE

The prior to school services met the licensing standards set by the NSW Department of Community Services. These standards do not apply to playgroups which are not required to be licensed as parents attend with their children. Data requested from the National Childcare Accreditation Council re the accreditation status of centres was not forthcoming. As centres need to be accredited for their parents to receive Child Care Benefit, it can be assumed that these services met some level of accreditation.

3.2 – Data Analysis

Data were analysed to identify trends and patterns of responses applicable to the research questions underpinning the study. Statistical analyses of the questionnaire data were conducted using descriptive and parametric techniques. Qualitative analyses of the focus group and interview data were conducted using an interpretive inquiry method (Lambert, 2003).

3.3 – Research Approvals and Ethics

Prior to commencement of the research, approvals were obtained through the formal research ethics approval processes of the UWS Human Ethics Committee, and the School Education Research Approval Process (SERAP) of the NSW Department of Education and Training. The research design and its conduct were required to satisfy the committees on a range of procedural and ethical issues including anonymity, coercion, dissemination of results and ethical storage of data. Additionally, the participation of individual school sites involved approval processes involving principal endorsement in some cases, and the

approval of the school board in others. All sites approached agreed to be involved in the research.

3.4 – Recruitment Methods and Procedures

The schools selected for the research were located in the postcode 2780 area. This area was chosen because of its diversity of population and because five schools were located within its boundaries. Five schools (three NSW DET schools and two independent schools) supplied a sufficient cross section of the Blue Mountains population to give results which might be indicative of trends and issues and act as an effective pilot for further larger scale research.

3.5 – Communication Strategies Supporting the Research

A communication campaign using public relations principles and practices was used to support the research process. Target audiences were defined, with objectives for each target audience built into a communication plan. Target audiences included participating school Principals, participating parents, Blue Mountains residents, Blue Mountains City Council senior staff and councilors, and professionals in the child and family service network.

The communication strategy focusing on school Principals received the greater percentage of project resources as Principals were elected as the key stakeholder in facilitating the project's success. At the beginning of the research process, Council had an established relationship with only one of the project schools, where a School as Community Centre site existed. Forming relationships with the other four school Principals was therefore the first goal of the communication strategy.

After initial contact through an explanatory letter (see Appendix 1), face to face meetings were sought with school Principals before they received documentation about the project from the Department of Education and Training. The purpose of these visits was to begin the process of relationship-building between Council's Community Outcomes Department and schools. It was hoped that these early visits would facilitate support for the project and would also enable the research team to understand each Principal's

perspective on the research rationale; that is, that quality early childhood education contributes to school and later life success.

Once Principals had received the project documentation from the Department of Education and Training, Council's Child and Family Services Development Officer scheduled another meeting with each Principal. The purpose of these meetings was to introduce the Research Assistant as a partner to Council and to set up a process for collecting the research information that was responsive to the established routines of each school. At these meetings copies of all data collection tools, consent forms and anticipated research plan were distributed.

This relationship building approach to engaging the schools resulted in active support from four of the five Principals. The one Principal who did not extend active cooperation to the project did respond to a request to facilitate the release of a Kindergarten teacher to join the project's steering committee. This teacher became both the designated contact person for the project and the facilitator of the research process in this school.

During the research process other child and family projects in the Blue Mountains began to identify primary schools as critical universal entrance-ways through which positive child and family outcomes could be achieved. These developments resulted in Council using the research project as a catalyst to continue relationship building with the schools involved. Two of the five schools responded to an invitation to attend a seminar on early brain development held at Council, two Principals joined the project's steering committee mid-way through the project and the project team visited the Blue Mountains District Superintendent to discuss this project and other school-centred developments in the Blue Mountains child and family sector.

Teachers were advised of the project, with the support of their Principal, and invited to participate (see Information Statement for Teachers - Appendix 4, and Consent Forms for Teacher Interviews - Appendix 5). Dates for meeting staff, for the distribution of surveys and for focus groups were negotiated between Principals and teachers.

The support of the teachers was essential to the project in the delivery and collection of the data collection tools, and in informing and reminding parents about the return of surveys and the possibility of participation in focus groups.

The second group of people targeted was participating parents. The process of relationship forming with Principals resulted in four of the five schools taking an active role in promoting the project and facilitating the return of questionnaires from parents. The project team supported this context by placing articles throughout the research process in school newsletters. In addition, an Information Statement for Parents (see Appendix 2) and Consent Forms for Parent Focus Groups (see Appendix 3) were given to the parents of kindergarten children in the target schools by class teachers. A one page 'plain English' explanation of the research questionnaires and a focus group invitation was also attached to the front of questionnaire package. The purpose of this explanation was to supplement the more complex questionnaire covering letter which was required to gain ethics approval for the project. Parent participation in the study was voluntary and did not affect families' access to services.

This combined Principal and parental engagement strategy resulted in a 59% overall return rate. One school however only gained a 25% return rate. This was regarded as satisfactory in that the school reported a very low level of parental engagement even in core school processes, such as parent-teacher interviews. Without this school, the return rate of the remaining four schools was 69.25%.

The goal of the communication campaign with the general public was to inform the wider community about the value of early childhood education and to legitimate the project for participating parents. A media release about the project, with an accompanying photo, was successfully placed in the local paper at the beginning of the research process. Once the project was complete and following the tabling of the draft report, a second media release was organized. Articles about the project were also placed in Council's rate payer and staff newsletters.

The fourth target audience group, the Blue Mountains child and family service network, were engaged in the project through two modalities. Firstly presentations about the project were given to the Children's Services Forum and the Families First Early Intervention

Child and Family Forum. The project findings were widely distributed through the many email newsletter networks that circulate in the Nepean region. Secondly the project team invited key leaders in the child and family network to join the research steering committee with the intent of building a broad base of collaborative support, input and perspectives around the project's purpose (see Appendix 10 for list).

The last target audience of the communication plan was senior council members. A major re-structure of Council at the time of the project's conception prevented upward communication about the project at this point. However a member of Council's Executive later joined the project steering committee and a council business paper about the project's findings will be presented to Council at the conclusion of the project.

3.6 –Participant Description and Sample Size

The research cohort involved:

- a) Parents of 148 children attending school for the first time in 2006 in the postcode area 2780. Five schools sites (three [3] NSW Department of Education and Training [DET] schools and two [2] Independent schools) were invited to participate in the study.
- b) Teachers of the kindergarten classes of these 5 schools who were invited to participate in interviews and discussions.

NOTE

No children were directly involved in the research.

3.6.1 Participation figures

In total, 89 families (representing 60% of the total) from the five schools participated by completing the parent questionnaire, and 82 families (55% of total) completed the PEDS.

Nine (9) parents (6% of the total families; 10% of the responsive group) from three of the five schools also participated in the parent focus groups.

Three focus groups (one in each of three schools) were held with parents although the numbers in each varied considerably. These were conducted by the Research Project

Officer who audio recorded participants' responses (all were willing to have their responses audio recorded) and took additional jottings to amplify these.

Teacher interviews were held at each school with the kindergarten teachers. However, at one school the teacher involved with a kindergarten group was on leave and therefore unable to participate. In addition, in one school, a Principal and in another an Assistant Principal also attended the interviews with their teaching staff. Several teachers were happy to have their responses audio recorded, however others were not and their responses were recorded by the Research Assistant as jottings. One teacher had pre-prepared her responses in writing and these became a most valuable data resource. Overall nine teachers were interviewed.

All audio recorded interviews with teachers and responses from parent focus groups were transcribed and these together with jottings were added to the data set for the project, for analysis.

NOTE

The quality of formal child care settings using DoCs licensing and NCAC accreditation processes provides only a minimal assessment of the level of quality. For example, regulations by their nature only address minimal standards. Further the NCAC criteria are assessed on a four point scale, unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good quality and high quality. Centres are only required to meet the satisfactory level on any criteria to be deemed accredited. More refined instruments such as the Infant and Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) would need to be administered to obtain any meaningful assessment of program quality. Such an investigation would require a larger scale study.

3.7 – Site Based Research

| Site | Support for Research | Teacher Interviews | Questionnaire & PEDS | Parent Interviews |
|----------|---|---|--|--|
| A | Strong School Support. Staff organised questionnaire distribution and teacher interview at the end of Term 2. | Relief organised to enable teacher involvement.. Interview audio recorded and transcribed. | 100% response rate from survey. 88% response rate from PEDS | Two parents participated after a slow start. Interview audio recorded and transcribed. |
| B | Strong school support. Timelines required flexibility due to busy school schedules and school holidays. Teacher interview within timeline -questionnaires not distributed until Term 3. | Both K teachers attended interview. Interview audio recorded. Principal also participated and facilitated by asking questions and sharing anecdotes. | 25% response rate from survey. 19% response rate PEDS. | No parent responses to invitation to participate in focus groups. Parent focus group cancelled. |
| C | Strong school support. Teachers organised to meet with RA during allocated Staff Meeting. | Both K teachers interviewed - NO audio tapes. Assistant Principal (K/1 teacher) sent copy of notes taken at interview with other teachers. AP made additional comments regarding organisation of Orientation Program. | 57% response rate from survey. 55% returned PEDS. Many parents made lengthy, well written comments in questions 22-25. Parents demonstrated high level literacy skills. | No parent responses to invitation to participate in focus groups. Parent focus group cancelled. |
| D | Strong school support. All dates organised in one phone call and the research planned and completed within a week. | Teacher prepared for interview with hard copy of key points and left own notes to supplement those of RA. Notes provided most extensive information of all interviews. Used as basis for organising all responses to Focus Questions. | 58% response rate from surveys. 50% response rate for PEDS. Limited comments. | 6 mothers attended focus group discussion lasted 1hr 45 minutes. 3 parents had no access to a car so comments most valuable. Principal said that many parents, especially single mothers, had transport issues which probably impacted on access to early childhood services. This was backed up in Focus Group. |
| E | School support for project varied. | Three (3) teachers participated in interviews. Assistant Principal joined discussion as well. Teachers spoke openly about the transition experiences. Interviews audio recorded. | 89% response rate from surveys in Classroom A. 42% response rate from Classes B & C. Total 62% response rate response rate for PEDS. | One parent only attended Parent Group Discussion. |

Section 4

Data Analysis - Results

As already noted, a variety of analyses were conducted on the questionnaire data, using parametric and descriptive statistics. Transcripts of the interviews and the focus groups were examined for common themes. The results from the surveys and the qualitative results from the interviews and focus groups are indicated separately, but largely inform the research questions previously listed.

4.1 – Data Obtained from Questionnaires

Of the 148 questionnaires distributed, 89 were completed and returned. This represented 60% of the total; a very satisfactory return rate for this type of data collection. Eighty-two parents (55% of total) completed the PEDS. Nine parents (6% of the total families; 10% of the responsive group) from three of the five schools also participated in the parent focus groups.

4.1.1 Demographic results

The 89 children whose families participated in the study comprised 49 girls and 40 boys. The demographic data obtained from the questionnaire paints an instructive picture of the families who participated. Thus, for this group:

- English was overwhelmingly the language spoken at home (96.6%);
- 69.7% had lived in the area for more than five years;
- 6.9% were from Aboriginal/Torres Strait Island background;
- 83% have the use of a car during the day (an important factor in terms of access to a full range of early childhood services);
- 21.3% of the families had only one child, 39.5% had two children, 25.6% had three children and 13.6% had four or more children;
- 20.2% of the children lived in families with one adult, 77.5% in families with two adults and 2.2% in families with three or more adults;
- 53.9% lived in families where one adult worked, 31.5% where two adults worked and 14.6% where no adult worked outside the home; and

- of those who completed the surveys, 40.4% had a university qualification, 23.6% a TAFE qualification and 40.4% high school qualifications.

Given the sample characteristics it was therefore not surprising that neither home language nor difficulties related to transport were found to emerge as barriers to accessing early childhood services. What did serve to distinguish the sample were family composition, work status and educational qualifications. The extent to which these factors affect parental perceptions of the barriers and enablers to accessing early childhood services may prove informative.

Most importantly for the study, 95.5% of the families had used early childhood services for the target child. For this group at least then, the issues around the impact of early childhood services on later outcomes may not be around whether they have had access to such opportunities but rather what the nature and quality of those services and their experiences of them have been.

It should also be noted that the high rate of usage of early childhood services precluded a statistical comparison of the perceived developmental outcomes at the time of commencing school of those children who had attended early childhood services with those who had not.

Research Question 1:

What is the extent of children's participation in formal early childhood prior to school services in the Blue Mountains post code area 2780?

As already noted, 95.5% of the children in the study had attended at least one early childhood service. As can be seen from the graph below, however, some types of services were more likely to be accessed than others. Preschool and long day care were the most likely to have been used, with 20 children having had experience of both.

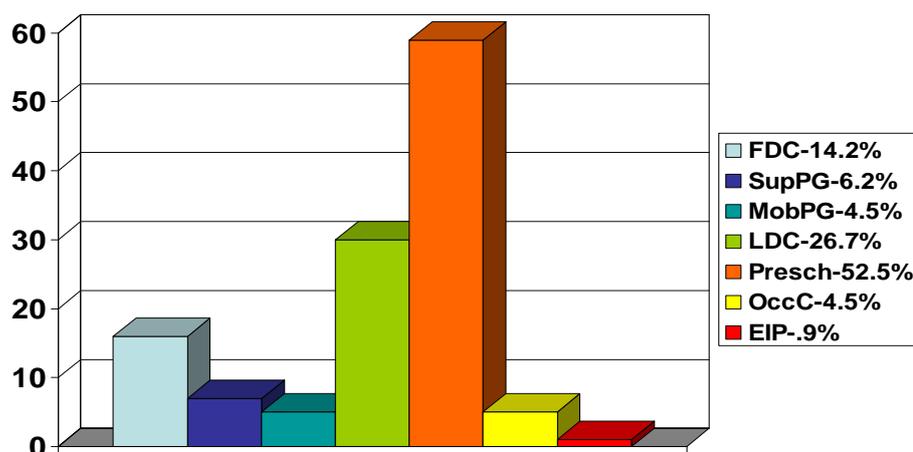


Figure 1: Number of families accessing various types of early childhood services
 (Key: FDC=Family Day Care; SupPG= Supported Play Group; MobPG=mobile Playgroup; LDC=Long Day Care; Presch=Preschool; OccC= Occasional Care; EIP=Early Intervention Program)
 N.B. The majority of families accessed more than one service for the target child.

Interestingly, given the emphasis which has recently been given to the role of playgroups through funding from government agencies such as Families First, relatively few of the families surveyed (10.7%) had had experience of these services. This is a matter which warrants further exploration. What needs to be determined is whether this lack of participation is due to the relative scarcity of playgroups, to families' not knowing they are available, not valuing them or not being able to attend them because of work, location or other barriers to access.

Of particular relevance in exploring this question is the pattern of families' use of early childhood services. Indeed, what the data show is that the majority of families (58.2%) accessed more than one type of early childhood service for the target child. Where only one service type was used it was most likely to be preschool (26.7% of the total sample), followed by long day care (7.1%). It is likely that this reflects the pattern of parental employment during the child's early years. This however can not be validated in the present study as the questionnaire gathered data on parents' current employment status only. It is a question which warrants further consideration in future studies.

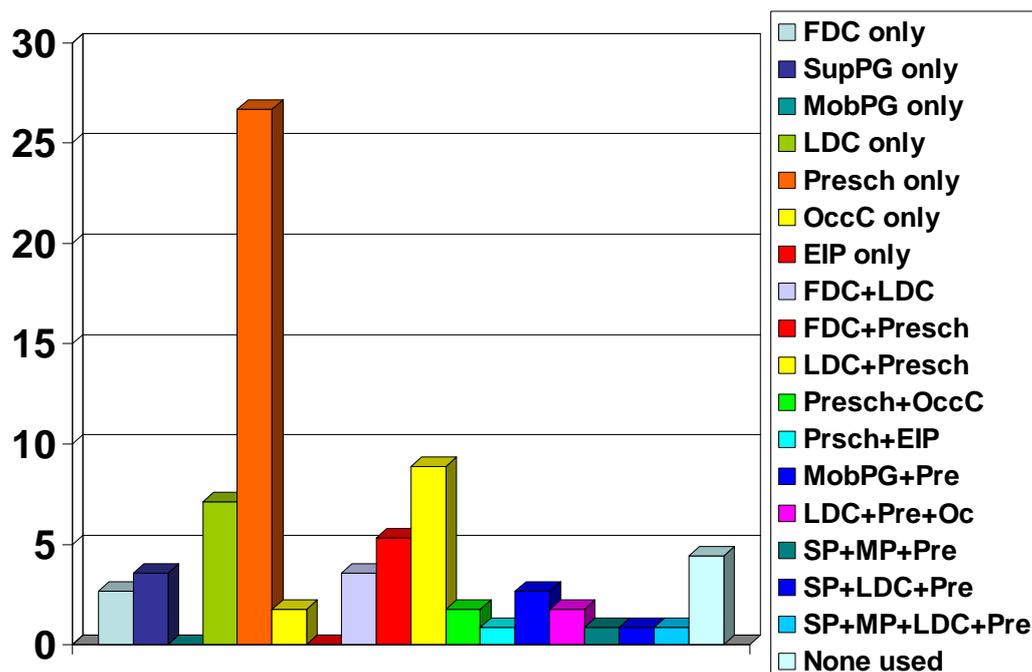


Figure 2: Patterns of early childhood services usage.

(Key: FDC=Family Day Care; SupPG,SP= Supported Play Group; MobPG,MP=mobile Playgroup; LDC=Long Day Care; Presch,Pre=Preschool; OccC,OC= Occasional Care; EIP=Early Intervention Program)

As Figure 2 above shows, families accessed various combinations of services to meet their needs with some 23% using two services for the target child. The most popular combination was long day care and preschool (8.9% of the total sample). As one of the parent’s comments suggests below, this may be a reflection of the families’ perceptions of the child’s needs as they become older. Indeed, examination of the combinations of services used by the families suggests that they relate largely to the age of the child, and not surprisingly, family circumstances.

It is also worth noting that only 14.6% of the total sample did not access the formal early childhood education system. This group comprises 10.1% who accessed only Family Day Care, Playgroups and Occasional Care services and 4.45% who used no early childhood services at all. The majority of children in the sample (83.4%) have had experience of Long Day Care and/or Preschool prior to their commencing school. As previously noted, it is experience of these formal settings which has been found to deliver long-term benefits to children.

Parents' comments related to the use of different kinds of services are instructive of their rationale in choosing the types of services they did. For example, one mother thought that,

Family day care was fantastic – a day away from home for my child but not so busy as long day care.

Another parent used at least two services and said,

Occasional care hours flexible and available till 5.30-6.00pm. Good interaction with other children and teachers. Preschool great approach and teachers good. Stable learning and nurturing environment.

Yet a third said of her experiences with long day care that there was,

Good staff to children ratio. Excellent communication and early intervention offered by expert staff. Long Day care became preschool in final year – facilities offered a very happy, child specific environment.

Of importance, then, is the finding that the majority of families accessed more than one early childhood service for the target child. Families are choosing (or attempting to choose) the pattern of services that best meet their and their child's changing needs. It should be noted too, that preschool emerged as the service most accessed by families (52.5%) with long day care being accessed by 26.7% of the sample only. Whether this difference is due to availability of places or parental preference warrants further investigation.

Research Question 2:

What are parents' perceptions of the barriers and enablers of children's participation in these programs?

Here, too, the high rate of participation has necessitated some adjustment to the questions being asked of the data. Thus, what is of interest, given the families' high take up of early childhood services, is what they saw as important when deciding whether to use early childhood services. Parents were asked to rate the relative importance of a number of possible factors on a scale of 1 to 4 (where 4 was "very important" and 1 "not important at all"). As can be seen from Table 1 below, *Preparing my child for school*, *Wanting my child to make more friends* and *Enabling the child to learn more* were the reasons seen as most important. For the families, then, consideration of the child's needs is seen as most important. Not surprisingly given the sample characteristics, *Helping the child learn*

English was rated the least important overall. Reasons related to parental needs such as *Needing to go to work* and *Needing time to have a break* were seen as less important and were also found to have greater variability in the rating given.

| Reasons for Choosing Early Childhood Services | Mean | S.D. |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| Preparing my child for school | 3.47 | .765 |
| Wanting child to make more friends | 3.10 | 3.10 |
| Enabling the child to learn more | 3.01 | .814 |
| Needing to go to work | 2.27 | 1.266 |
| Learning how to teach my child | 2.08 | .984 |
| Needing time to have a break | 1.88 | .98 |
| Meeting other parents | 1.68 | .834 |
| Helping child learn English | 1.53 | .954 |

Table 1: Parental reasons for choosing early childhood services (Scale of 1 – 4, where 4 = very important)

Comparisons of the families’ responses by the school the child attended yielded no significant differences. The only differences found, after conducting statistical comparisons (ANOVAs), related to comparisons made according to the respondents’ educational qualifications. Thus, with respect to the importance given to *Needing time for a break* ($F(2,73) = 5.316, p < .01$), TAFE trained parents saw this as more important than those with high school ($p < .01$) or university ($p < .05$) qualifications. In addition, TAFE trained parents saw *Learning how to teach my child* ($F(2,72) = 3.179, p < .05$) as more important than university trained parents ($p < .05$). No explanation for these differences is immediately apparent. It may be that they are an artifact of the sampling. Further analysis is needed to substantiate whether these differences are real.

Barriers to participation in early childhood services were identified specifically by only two families. One indicated that cost was a significant factor, while the other commented that her child had been unhappy about going to an early childhood setting. This is in contrast to the data deriving from the focus groups where transport and access were identified as significant issues. A number of other comments give a de facto understanding of some of the barriers to participation in services, or at least indicate what might be potential barriers in some circumstances. Funding was consistently mentioned as

an area they would like to see strengthened for early childhood services. The impact of perceived low funding on consequent costs to families was a constant theme. Comments included:

FUNDING! More funding should be allocated to enable Preschool, early intervention, transition to school programs.

More government funding. Make sure staff are fully trained.

If the government subsidised these programs more heavily. The prices are often too high and staff are underpaid/valued.

Other comments included

More availability. It seems difficult to get a place.

Cleaner premises, cleaner and better presented staff. Friendly atmosphere more welcoming to parents. Staff at [type of service] centre, particularly those answering phones are quite rude and lack customer service skills.

If a preschool was located closer to my home I would have used this service as I don't drive and there was no bus service to the preschool.

More knowledge about what was available. More programs available in my neighbourhood. Lower fees for day care and preschool.

Another parent felt that services could be improved by, “not sharing food off communal plates, by bringing own food” because “epidemic viruses/flu/colds spread from child to child”. Several others indicated they would like smaller teacher child ratios and for teachers to focus on the children rather than spending all their time in paperwork.

Research Question 3:

How does participation in these early childhood services relate to parent and teacher perceptions of children's skills, competencies and development, at the commencement of formal schooling?

The high participation rate of the children in early childhood services precludes any meaningful statistical analysis of the impact of such services on parent and teacher perceptions of the children's skills, competencies and development at the time of their commencing school. Indeed, there is no way of determining whether those who responded

to the surveys differ in this respect from those who chose not to respond. This is an issue which needs to be addressed in subsequent research.

Comments relating to what parents liked best about services however, indicated their high regard for prior to school services overall as being valuable to their children’s social and academic development. These included “*Children learnt a lot. Good quality of care*”, “*I liked the structure of the learning programme, lots of fun activities which had a learning theme. I especially liked the way staff supported my child in a nurturing manner*”, and “*My child developed social skills and grew in confidence*”.

The value of early childhood services as preparation for commencing school was also commented upon. Parents said “*it was a wonderful experience and gave my child school-readiness*”. “*Excellent Transition into Kindy*“ and “*It gave my child a taste of what was expected at a school, i.e. bell times etc.*”

Consideration of the parents’ perceptions of their children’s developmental status as measured by the PEDS is also of interest.

| | No | Yes | A Little |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------------|
| Speech | 67.1% | 9.8% | 23.2% |
| Understanding what said | 88.9% | 2.5% | 8.6% |
| Fine Motor | 96.3% | 1.2% | 2.4% |
| Gross Motor | 98.8% | 0 | 1.2% |
| Behaviour | 78% | 8.5% | 13.4% |
| Social Skills | 75.6% | 4.9% | 19.5% |
| Independence | 86.4% | 2.5% | 11.1% |

Table 2: Parents’ perceptions of their child’s developmental status on commencing school as measured by the PEDS.

As Table 2 below indicates, three areas of development appear to be more likely as areas of concern for families. These are: Speech (where some 33% indicated some level of concern), Social Skills (where 24.4% expressed some concern) and Behaviour (21.9%

indicated some concern). Whilst no definitive explanations for these findings can be made, these are areas which parents may see as critical to the child’s success in the school environment. All relate directly to the child’s ability to interact with peers and adults in a positive way. This is an area which warrants deeper consideration.

Research Question 4:

What is the relationship between quality of the early childhood experience and children’s skills, competencies and development on commencing school?

The reasons that families gave for choosing the particular services they did provide some indication of how they assess the quality of the early childhood services which with they had had experience. Here, too, parents were asked to rate the relative importance of a number of possible reasons on a scale of 1 to 4 (where 4 was “very important” and 1 “not important at all”). As can be seen from Table 2 below, of most importance to families appears to be factors related to the quality of the service; factors related to convenience, such as closeness to home or work rated less highly.

| Reason for Choosing a Service | Mean | S.D. |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Staff were friendly | 3.69 | .631 |
| Good reputation | 3.61 | .610 |
| Good resources | 3.29 | .758 |
| Staff respected my family’s values | 3.03 | 1.00 |
| Had place for my child | 3.01 | .919 |
| Affordable | 3.01 | .925 |
| Close to home | 2.95 | 1.005 |
| Easy to get to | 2.83 | 1.031 |
| Close to work | 1.80 | 1.090 |

Table 2: Parental reasons for choosing the particular early childhood services they did (Scale of 1 – 4, where 4 = very important)

Some of the supporting comments relating to reasons for use of particular services, which may also be equated with enablers to participation in early childhood services included,

staff respected the children and their ability to learn at different rates and encouraged this, and

the expense of preschool was great but [my child] got so much from attending – would like more affordable preschool options.

Once again, the needs of the child are seen as paramount. Affordability, it should be noted, is seen as an important consideration but there is some variability given to the importance attached to it related, no doubt, to families' particular financial circumstances.

The data obtained from the parental survey point to the parents' concerns for the quality of the experiences which their children have whilst in early childhood settings. These emerge as overriding considerations; a point further explored in the parent focus groups.

Comments highlighting this included,

very caring and understanding – adjusted for child.

The staff are great. Always ready to communicate. Always let me know what sort of a day the children have had.

They were very understanding about some problems we had.

Friendly staff. Always told me if they had any concerns about my child or [my child's] development.

In summary the key findings from the quantitative data are as follows;

- 1. Very high utilisation rate of early childhood services by the cohort***
- 2. Services most likely used were preschools followed by long day care***
- 3. Many families used more than one service with the combination most likely to be preschool and long day care***
- 4. Minimal use of playgroups by the cohort***
- 5. Parents rated the quality of care provided on the basis of the personal characteristics of the staff***
- 6. Parents' concerns focused on behaviour issues and social skills***
- 7. A number of parents raised concerns about children's speech problems***
- 8. Benefits (social and academic) to the child were the most common motivating factor for utilisation***
- 9. Many parents raised the cost and affordability of child care as an issue***
- 10. Many parents saw preschool experience as significant in preparing children for school***

NOTE: These findings need to be read in the context of the demographic data

4.2 - Qualitative findings

The transcripts from the focus groups held with parents and the interviews conducted with teachers were analysed and coded under the key issues which emerged from the data. From these, common themes relating to the research questions have been identified.

4.2.1 Parent Responses

Nine parents from three schools participated in the focus groups. Whilst discussions with parents elicited rich data, these cannot be representative of the whole, nor does the information gained address every issue. This is to be expected of the small pilot sample, nevertheless, some inferences can be made and conclusions drawn from parents' discussions.

Research Question 1:

What is the extent of children's participation in formal early childhood prior to school services in the Blue Mountains post code area 2780?

All nine parents had used some kind of early childhood service for their children. Most had accessed either long day care or preschool, one parent made use of the local playgroups and another, a supported playgroup in the year prior to school.

As with the quantitative results, it has been necessary to adjust the question related to children's participation in prior to school services to take consideration of comments made about different kinds of services to ascertain the types of services parents used. For example, comments included, "*This preschool suited my child*", "*I decided to use the playgroups in the area*" and "*the Child Care Centre there offered late hours*".

Settling at school

When asked how children settled into school and what helped prepare them for school, all parents agreed that their early childhood experiences had been beneficial. A parent whose child had attended a preschool adjacent to the school said that it had been "*onsite preparation for school*" and that "*at the end of 3rd term and through 4th term, they*

[preschool staff] *took a group each day over to the school*". "They let them know the rules ... and that really helped with the transition to school". Other mothers indicated that early childhood services had helped their children develop "social skills", "make friends", "integrate with others" and to participate in a "structured learning environment". The importance of structure was a common theme. One parent said,

Sharing and having structured time. That was something I noticed. They [playgroup for preschoolers] had a particular play time and then a particular indoor time and then an outdoor, whereas at home, it's whatever and then it's a shock when they get to school and everything is structured. That was something I really appreciated with that group.

For others however, there were considerations other than structure that were thought to be important in early childhood services. One parent said, "That's [structured time] *not the highest priority for me. It's having people who care about the children. Different services suit different children*". Another said,

I chose [name] Preschool because of the philosophy they have with children and how they teach and how children learn and just the whole philosophy around that ... adding children with the environment as well as their place in the world, respecting others. It's not just how to count and colours, it's a whole nurturing type of system I think. I stuck with that. The teachers were great and even though I had to drive I still particularly chose to have the chance to go to that Preschool. I did have a look at other Preschools in the area but they were either too structured in what they were wanting children to do or they weren't planned enough.

It was not just preschools however, which offered children the opportunity to socialise and helped them develop skills for school. The mother of a child who had attended a playgroup said that this child, "*settled in very well*" [to school], and she attributed "*quite a bit of that to that Playgroup because my other children, particularly my first one [who had not attended any early childhood service], was a nightmare starting school. It was such a big change*".

Transition programs

Most parents interviewed agreed that early childhood services had helped their children develop independence, but also indicated that some kind of transition program was a necessity. One mother said, "*we played 'going to school' at home lots of times*" "*we packed the bag and got the lunch ready*", in order to help with the transitions. Familiarity with school and school procedures also helped with this. One parent said,

It's important to be familiar with the school they're going to go to ... to know what the environment is like. They have a transition program here and the kids go into the classrooms one day a week before they go to school. They got to meet their teacher before they started. [Once parents enrol their children] they can go into the transition program at the end of the year.... At the transition program there's the option that you can stay or go. Then they get to know that Mum comes back. That's important. They don't get upset then when they know that you're coming back.

Research Question 2:

What are parent's perceptions of the barriers and enablers of children's participation in these programs?

Barriers to access

Transport was a problem for the parents who did not have access to a car making travel to early childhood services difficult at times. Comments such as "...the weather, if you haven't got plastic for the pram, the kids get wet" and "...around here there are not many footpaths" were indicative of the concern. One mother also spoke about the safety aspects associated with travel to and from services. She said,

We only have one car and my husband takes it to work so I walk a lot. I'm really scared when there's no footpath because you've got to walk on the side of the road. There's gravel and the cars race by.

Yes, and there's only one pedestrian crossing in [name of area], and it's not even a proper designated pedestrian crossing with the stripes. There's flags on the side and often the cars just go through it. There's just inadequate footpaths.

Another mother mentioned the difficulties she experienced with accessing a service for her child, but persevered to ensure the best outcomes. She said,

I had to go on the train. I had to walk to the station and then walk from the station in Lawson. Sometimes I walked to Mum and Dad's and they gave me a lift down there but it was a long walk coming home. I was scared on the train sometimes because I had [name] in the pram. It was too far for [name] to walk.

Cost was another concern mentioned by parents. As one mother stated, "I chose the Preschool Playgroup that was at the school. I chose it because it was free and because it orientated my child to this school".

Speaking about other parents, one mother thought that,

Rather than sending their children to Preschool they just opt for the Day Care which is...not really preschoolised. At the end of the day people are looking at their pockets. How much is this costing? The difference in price is astronomical. Really, it's a huge difference.

Another parent was also deterred by cost, but was happy to have her child at home and use the local playgroup. She said,

to send him full time would have been quite a strain on us and not something that I felt was necessary really all round. If I needed childcare I perhaps would have considered it but since I was at home and there were three children, I could cope.

Availability of childcare places was a concern to one parent who commented,

I know at [name of service], they get booked out. I know someone who couldn't access it because of places. I booked [my child] in quite early the year before because I knew that if I had decided that [my child] wasn't ready and I wanted to put [name] in half way through the year, the chances were that I wouldn't be able to do that because the places would all be full. I do know that some parents that have moved up to the mountains ... might have moved up half way through the year but they needed to wait till the next year to access a service.

Lack of information was also noted. One parent said,

What I did find hard was to find information...I would have liked to have obtained more about Family Day Care. I rang up the Council and they told me "These are the Day Cares in your area – here's the phone numbers and addresses", which was great and they did say at the end of it, "Oh have you considered family day care?" I thought, "I don't know, I don't know." They said they were really good but it just stopped there. It would have been great to get some more information on that. Thinking back now I would have loved to be able to have used them especially during school holiday time.

Misgivings about services were expressed in a number of different ways and could be conceived of as barriers to access to early childhood services in general or to particular types of services. For example, two parents indicated that they had accessed Family Day Care for a time but removed their children for various reasons. One said,

I used a Family Day Care. It was a pretty good one. I had my [child] there for a short period of time but I just felt I was paying money for [the child] to play. I thought I couldn't pay the money for [child] to play for the day. I have a baby at home so decided to use the playgroups in the area.

Another mother made her views very clear saying,

*I think funding is needed for Preschools because a lot of these kids are going to [Long] Day Care. **They shouldn't be at [Long] Day Care.** They should be at Preschool and that's the factor why parents don't take them to Preschool because it's the money and the funding.*

Of considerable concern to parents was the notion that long day care services were inferior to preschool services and several parents commented on this. One noted that preschool meant “taking [my child] out of that Day Care setting where [name of child] was often with children much younger”. “Being in that larger social setting” was important.

One mother ensured that her child moved from a long day care to a preschool in the two years prior to the commencement of school saying,

You're looking at ages 3 to 6. It's a different age bracket from 1 to 3. It's good to interact with kids a little bit younger and older than yourself but within the same type of age. That's the age you want them to be with before school. They're more courteous to the kids younger than them. They'll help them but then they'll get encouragement from the older kids as well, which is also important. They learn from example that sort of thing. You don't have to worry about a child that's crying and doesn't want to eat their dinner and needs more help and the teachers are taken away from the older children to the younger children.

Another expressed her concerns saying that,

I think the problem is that the care is not 1:1. They [Long Day Care Centres] employ only the minimum staff. There's always a lot of staff leaving these centres. When a child managed to get out of the Centre and when it looked as if the Child Care Centre was going to be liable [referring to recent newspaper reports of an incident within a centre elsewhere], they blamed a staff member. I have real concerns about this.

Enabling access

As with the quantitative results, the responses given in the focus groups have necessitated some adjustment to the questions being asked. While some of the enablers to access have been inferred from the data, what is also of interest, given that all nine families in the focus groups accessed some form of early childhood service, is what they saw as important when deciding whether to use early childhood services.

A positive cost factor was certainly an enabler in the case of one Mum who chose to attend a playgroup. She said, *“I chose the Preschool Playgroup that was at the school. I chose it because it was free and because it orientated [my child] to this school”*.

Other parents spoke about different kinds of early childhood services and some expressed negative thoughts about long day care services in particular. With respect to cost they felt that long day care and government subsidies were particularly geared toward working mothers. Comments included, *“they appeal to the low income earners, those on a minimum wage”*, and *“They can have the government subsidy up front”*.

Flexibility and convenience were also valued. One mother said *“My child needed to sleep every day and there was no space. But they were very flexible and let him sleep in the office”*. Another commented, *“I visited all the Day Care Centres and just chose one close to work as well as one I thought was warm and friendly and inviting and they were flexible with their hours”*.

Several mothers also commented on the convenience of having a preschool adjacent to the school, especially when families had children attending both. One mother said, *“This preschool has been absolutely fabulous for me because it’s one park and one drop off for both school and preschool”*.

Additional aspects of an early childhood service deemed to be important (and therefore possibly enablers by default) included caring and friendly staff and the support offered to children. A corollary to this was found when one mother said in relation to withdrawal of her child from one centre after a management change, *“They didn’t seem to care about the kids anymore”*. *“Once the caring goes out of it, things just go down”*.

Most however commented that *“staff were very friendly and caring”*, even though this particular parent thought her centre was under-resourced. Another said,

They do notice your child there [at the centre]. Last Wednesday when we went, [my child’s] best friend wasn’t there. [Name] was really upset saying, ‘Who will talk to me?’ When I picked [my child] up all was fine. [Name] had a good day. The teachers had looked after [name] and made sure [name] had a friend. They really do look after their emotional well being.

Availability of Information was another defacto enabler. Knowing where to go and obtaining advice from others were viewed positively. One mother said,

we first went to the council and they had a printed list of the day cares. Then we physically drove around the area and had a look at the playgrounds and the buildings.

Another said, “*It was word of mouth for me*” and yet another commented “*I went to the Community Health Centre and they knew them*”.

In some cases too much information proved to be confusing as one mother noted. She said, “*It’s hard to find a good place because sometimes there’s conflicting reports*”.

Research Question 3:

How does participation in these early childhood services relate to parent and teacher perceptions of children’s skills, competencies and development, at the commencement of formal schooling?

Many comments suggested that parents considered early childhood services as being beneficial to their children’s development and instrumental in preparing them for some aspects of commencing school. In particular the key themes to emerge were issues related to:

- structure
- communication
- early intervention
- space and resources

The structure of the daily program was viewed positively by some parents, especially as a support in transitioning to school. There was recognition of the differences between home and school and in particular the need to conform to routines, which participation in early childhood services had provided. As one Mum said, “*Having rules is good*”. “*My son likes to have rules*”.

Another said,

My children didn’t really see a lot other than our own family and we can cater to their wants and needs but when they are in a group they’ve got to

learn to get along. Sharing and having structured time. That was something I noticed. They had a particular play time and then a particular indoor time and then an outdoor ... where at home, it's whatever, and then it's a shock when they get to school and everything is structured. That was something I really appreciated with that group.

The idea of structure was echoed by others who said,

They had a really good structured program and that's what the Preschool is set up to do. To be a place for children who would within the next two years, be attending school. And that's what I wanted for [name]. We chose to do that. [Name] went two days and then I increased [my child] to three days towards the end of the year, the last couple of terms because I wanted [name] to experience going somewhere full time for more days. To prepare [my child] for that physical exhaustion that I knew [name] would get at school five days a week

Other comments focusing on the importance of structure and organisation in early childhood services as a precursor to starting school included,

[Preschool made my child more able to...] sit in a group. [child] knew to put [] hand up. [Child] felt confident about recognising [] name. Using the things that [] expected to use in terms of scissors, pencils and those sorts of things. Being in groups... that kind of structure that school has, I think [child] achieved that at preschool and that wasn't unfamiliar for [child] to have to sit on the floor and get up for that activity. Those guidelines and rules.... There's so much that's new anyway.

Communication between staff and parents about their children's development was mentioned by several parents. They appreciated the time staff took to let them know what was happening in the early childhood environment. One mother said that,

At [name of centre] they had a Daily Diary which was a big A3 flip over book. It flipped over each day and they would take photos during the day and it was like a story board by the end of the day of exactly what the kids did and there would be some art work displayed related to the particular activities they were doing. Those were all kept and were put around the room. And each child had their own folder. That was a compilation of their work over the whole year. That was collected and you could look at that any time. That was always available.

Similarly, another mother commented,

they didn't have photos [at our centre] but they did take videos and CDs from time to time of the children working and playing. The workbooks would always be available. You could always contact the teachers and the coordinator there and come and talk about the kids any time. Access was really great. She was in the classroom as well as the teachers. You could

always come in and have a look in the classroom, just watch and observe. But they didn't have any formal book as to what they'd done during the day.

Early Intervention was also associated with early childhood services. A parent said, “*They [centre staff] can pick up problems before [children] get to school*”, while another spoke of a child she knew, who may have benefited by some early intervention had the child attended an early childhood service. She said,

Perhaps they [EC staff] could screen them. There is a little [child] in Kinder whose speech is terrible. [The child] goes to speech therapy now but whether [child] could have gone twelve months ago had [child] been screened, I don't know!

Space and resources and recognising children's individual needs was important to some families. One parent indicated that, “*My [child] hated going [to the EC service]. [Name] hated other kids being in [] space. [Name] is much better at school, where the other children aren't in [my child's] personal space. [Name] sits at the desk.*

Another parent also considered space to be important, commenting favourably on its aspects in the service her child attended.

[Name of Centre] is fantastic. It comes from the Director too and the whole staff is wonderful. They have quiet corners. The area is compartmentalized. There's room for rowdy play, all together, and there is space to have the group split into two. They run each room according to the level they are at. The children can move into the next group when they are ready.

Another said that, “*This is a very personalized preschool and they are very observant. My child didn't have any trouble integrating*”.

Some negative comments also related to space or to a need for more space and better use of facilities. As space is an important factor in providing well organised environments for children, parents comments were important. One parent said, “*A difficulty there [at a named service] is the space.*” Others said,

I think that [named] preschool would be better if it was extended in size.

The facilities there [named service] are just not purpose built. There's a huge high pitched roof and so the noise was just awful.

Research Question 4:

What is the relationship between quality of the early childhood experience and children's skills, competencies and development on commencing school?

Quality is defined differently by different people, however, the following comments give some understandings of parents' personal impressions of what they believe to constitute quality with respect to the early childhood experience for their children. In general, all parents participating in focus groups perceived the quality of their immediate past early childhood experience for their children as being good and generally spoke highly of each centre.

Remarks included,

Instead of the bright coloured paper and bright equipment, they would use the tree bark for painting on and dig in the sand or the ground. That suited [my child] ... The staff have been fabulous and using the environment really suited [my child].

My [child] stayed there for short periods and the nutrition there was very good.

The play area is integrated into the kitchen and the children quite often cook.

The teachers had looked after [child] and made sure [child] had a friend. They really do look after their emotional well being.

Comments related to families' previous experiences however, were not always complimentary, indicating some perceived inadequacies. Parents said,

... the noise was just awful. My [child] couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand it. Then they didn't care about the food. [Name] would come home with lunch not eaten and I'd ask [name about lunch, but child] didn't know. So we left there.

I went to a playgroup first but I was not comfortable there.

I also went to another Preschool ... and I just did not like that one at all. It looked like it was organised chaos to me when I walked in. I just didn't like the whole...there was too much screaming and noise going on and I thought it wasn't a true environment to put the kids in because it's for a long period.

Parents were also concerned about quality in terms of staff and perceived the differences between staff approaches. Comments on staff preparedness for the job included,

When I was on the [Name of centre] Committee, the teachers there spent a lot of time and effort keeping up to date. They all had a Diploma.

All the kids were playing outside and [teacher] didn't interact with the children really, but it was just how I saw the displays were out and the way the activities were set out around the room. They weren't enticing or encouraging kids to do any work.

I walked past [the centre] a couple of times and the kids were out in the Playground and staff were talking in the corner so they weren't supervising properly. Kids were yelling and in fact there was a three year old with the language coming out of her mouth I thought was dreadful. It wasn't picked up. The staff continued to talk and she was yelling over the fence at somebody. That didn't leave me with any great impression.

Of another centre comments included, “*They're not all qualified carers*” and “*there's a minimum number of staff set*”.

While yet another Mother commented of a different centre that “*There was consistent staff there that was very important for me*”.

One parent commented on support for staff in recognition of the difficulties with such a demanding job. She said,

The other thing that I looked at was whether the staff were supported as well ... I know how stressful it is. It is a tough job and I think that was one of the [good] things at [name of centre]. They had somebody to do the nappy runs. They had staff that were casual, that were able to give staff breaks. There was a Parent Committee that you could join. If you've got happy staff you've got happy kids. That's what I figure.

Supporting young families in the area

Whilst not particularly informing any of the research questions, parents mentioned other facilities in the community which may help make life easier for young families. Apart from additional funding for early childhood services, better communication about services

and improvements to transport, roads and services, families in the outer areas of postcode area 2780 felt they were being marginalised.

As one mother said,

[We need] a Medical Centre and a Café. We've got a little store on the corner down there but there's not even a letter box, and [the proprietor] sells all sorts of stuff that only she's interested in. We've got a big Post Office sorting office and there's not even a letter box there either. Every thing else is over there [points to Katoomba Central].

The lack of medical facilities were echoed by a number of other parents who were concerned about the time it took to get an appointment at the main Medical Centre in the town, to find a woman doctor, to get an appointment at the Nurse's station which operated in the peripheral area one day each week or even to access a pharmacy. They noted that,

At the Medical Centre there's a waiting list that's 3 weeks long. In the waiting room I overheard other women say they go to Penrith to see a female doctor. When we first came here we couldn't even get in to see a doctor. They had their books closed and they weren't taking any new patients.

With a shortage of medical staff in the town, there remained little option, therefore...

If you can't wait to see the doctor you have to go to the hospital.

This was reinforced by another mother who said,

I had a friend's [child] at our place and [] was running down the hall and fell and split [] lip. She [the child's mother] had a car but I told her to phone the ambulance because then you get into the hospital. Otherwise you have to sit there [at the Medical Centre] for hours to get any help.

In summary, the key findings from the focus groups with parents are as follows.

- 1. All parents interviewed perceived that early childhood services, irrespective of the type of service accessed and the number of days children attended, were beneficial for transitioning to school.*
- 2. Additional comments from parents indicated that early childhood services, in particular preschools, should be made available for all children as they were thought to be an essential precursor to school.*
- 3. Cost was a significant factor in the number of days children attended services and in some cases, whether parents selected free playgroups alone or paid for preschool or long day care services.*

4. *Transport was a major issue for parents who did not have access to a car, and concern was expressed over the state of the roads, the lack of footpaths and an inadequacy of other facilities such as Medical care, Post Office and Pharmacy in some parts of the 2780 postcode area.*
5. *There were significant misgivings about the types of program run by services and a persistence of the traditional dichotomy between preschools as places of education and day care services as providers of little more than care.*
6. *Quality was defined differently by different parents but generally parents perceived the quality of their early childhood setting as very high.*
7. *Parents commented on the need for additional services to support them in the raising of their children.*

4.2.2 Teachers Responses

Nine teachers were interviewed as part of the research process across the five different participating schools. Their responses given in interview have also been coded under the research questions used in the study. In this instance however, only Research Questions 1 and 3 relate to the discussions held.

Not unexpectedly, kindergarten teachers generally believed that participation in early childhood programs is of positive benefit to children and supports their transition to school. In the words of one teacher, coming to school with the “*language of school*” differentiated some children from others, and the source of this “school language” was generally understood to be from “preschools”. Whether this term was used generically to encompass all early childhood services or used specifically for services operating as sessional preschools is unclear.

Research Question 1:

What is the extent of children’s participation in formal early childhood prior to school services in the Blue Mountains post code area 2780?

Teachers thought that most children in their classes had been to ‘preschool’. Some identified a small group, who because of their cultural and religious convictions, did not attend early childhood services. Across the teachers interviewed in this study, there was

however, some variation in identifying the nature of the contribution that these services and experiences make for children, and there appeared to be little direct knowledge about particular early childhood services in the area accessed by families.

For example, one of the teachers commented when asked about the ‘preschools’,

The local ones. I don’t know who runs them, but well known ones!

Another teacher recommended a range of services however, that she perceived would have been beneficial for children and/or their families prior to the commencement of school. These included:

- *Parenting courses;*
- *Preschools – with structured, specific programs aimed at skill development in preparation for school;*
- *Speech therapy* (which she noted was a huge issue);
- *Counselling services* (also noted as a huge issue);
- *Playgroups;*
- *Toy library;*
- *Mobile play van.*

Only one teacher made a distinction between service types, perceiving ‘preschools’ as places of education and childcare centres as places where the emphasis was on physical care.

Research Question 3:

How does participation in these early childhood services relate to parent and teacher perceptions of children’s skills, competencies and development, at the commencement of formal schooling?

Most teachers perceived that participation in early childhood services had been beneficial for children as a precursor to starting school. They appreciated the fact that children knew that their parents would return for them at the end of the day and that they had already had some experience with cutting and drawing and were socially aware. In particular teachers’

responses from the interviews in relation to Question 3 fell under a number of themes. These include preparedness for school, play and language, and transition and continuity.

Preparedness for school

The development of social and emotional competence and the fostering of independence in life skills was a shared perspective. Teachers especially valued independent living skills but also referred to a range of other skills that children bring to school, such as gross and fine motor skills, music and art, vocabulary, general knowledge and the ability to listen. The importance of social skills such as turn taking, sharing and listening were consistently identified as potentially learned in early childhood services.

One teacher talked about the factors relating to preparedness for school. She believed that *“attendance at preschool was a factor, participation in a transition program, extra-curricula activities [such as sport or music], the child’s age [particularly for boys], maturity and reading at home with parents.”*

Other teachers commented,

Most of them were [prepared for school]. There were two or three who are still very immature and can’t cut and colour and write their own names still, even at this stage of the year [third term]. One of those is one that hadn’t been to preschool and the others had. The rest of the class generally were a lot more self sufficient. They were used to having mum come back so they were quite confident that after school, mum would be coming back so it was remarked on how well they were settled at the beginning of the year. They were a very settled little group. We didn’t have lots of tears and tantrums. Just the one child and he was the one repeating. Nobody else was upset. They were really quite confident and sure of themselves. They were great. I’d say the preschool experience had a lot to do with that. They are used to mum coming back. They are used to being with another grown up and doing things. They were still a bit preschoolery. They were still doing their own thing basically but they were quite confident.

I believe the preparedness for starting school is more to do with social skills rather than academic skills,

Family settings where parents spend time with their children were also considered as effective environments where the development of social skills were nurtured. With respect to family experiences, one teacher said,

A factor that contributes to [school readiness] for a lot of kids when they’re coming to school is when they’ve had lots of experiences like having been to the beach or playgrounds or cooking or washing or gardening, doing things and talking about it. Lots of talk. Having had lots of stories and being talked to and talked with.

The ones who are doing best are the ones whose families take them places and do things with them and talk to them and read to them.

And echoing the previous comments, another teacher felt that children's family life was a crucial factor in being prepared for school. She said it was important that,

Parents spend quality time with their children [talking to them, going to special places]...parents speak to the child in positive terms about school...that parents provide opportunities to develop good eye/hand control [cutting, playdough, puzzles]...children have opportunity to interact with others ...parents value education.

Some difference of opinion exists as to whether early childhood services could or should play a role in fostering the development of formal early literacy and numeracy skills, although clearly some parents and some teachers see this as an important dimension of early childhood as a site for 'preparation for school'. At least one of the teachers interviewed attributed the achievement of early concepts of print, and number and letter recognition as enabling children to be 'very well prepared' for school, and attributed this to attendance in the preschool. She thought that,

Some students were very well prepared. They had attended preschool and had basic print concepts, were able to write their name, knew some letters of the alphabet (although no letter sound correspondence), recognised some numbers and were counting orally to 10. They were able to use scissors, listen effectively for longer periods of time and appeared socially, emotionally and academically ready for school. All of which I would think they got at preschool.

The teacher interview data contains reference to a range of attributes that some children commence school exhibiting. These include poor language and social skills, poor fine motor skills and a limited idea of acceptable behaviour and language. This was often accompanied by evidence of financial hardship.

The children from unsettled families stand out ...the amount of [non] attendances and the time they get to school in the morning.

Poor hygiene is a big issue for us. Not knowing how to blow their nose or wash their hands after going to the toilet. Some are not toilet trained. I have one child with what I think is a stress related bowel disorder ... related to his very difficult home life and it's the stress which causes this.

some of our children ... come without having breakfast, no lunch or not in appropriate clothing. They might come on a very cold day in winter without a jumper. They might come with the toes out of their shoes and no socks. Our principal has ... bought [clothing] for children out of school funds.

Some of the children are not eating, sleeping and ... looked after. Some of our children have qualified to attend Manly Stewart House for a holiday, due to their very difficult home life.

Some of the more positive but nonetheless variable attributes of children starting school include,

the fine motor skills... some of them can colour staying in the lines others just go everywhere. Using scissors. Some children have obviously never used a pair of scissors and others have. A love of books and stories. Most kids like books but some children obviously have developed language through stories, listening to stories.

Gross motor skills: Balancing, being able to balance; being confident in being able to use their bodies; not being scared. Being able to run and skip and tumble confidently. Some children are good at stairs and others are not.

Being able to put on clothes. Some children can do it quite happily and others are still turning jumpers...taking jumpers off can be hard but some kids can come with that skill, others still can't do it. Very few come with shoe laces, being able to do shoe laces up.

Play and Language

In the teacher interviews, there was a consistency of views about the importance of early experiences in equipping young children with the kinds of social and 'world knowledge' that provides a sound foundation for school.

I believe the preparedness for starting school is more to do with social skills rather than academic skills.

I think that's where dress ups and creative play really help a child to develop emotionally. They can then role play. The anger, the frustrations, the joy, the grief, the bossiness they act out all of these things. That's what they do essentially. That's how they get their maturity. They will experience their own emotions through frustration at not being able to have that particular toy or somebody knocking down a tower that you've just built. Those things through physical play can be assisted in a Preschool.

Some teachers believed that many of these skills are developed in the family and develop from a range of experiences with family outside of the home and interacting with others.

You don't have to send them to preschool so long as you are available to give them lots of experiences.

It doesn't necessarily have to be preschool, but the fact that the parents do something. They might take children to a playgroup

Transition and continuity

Teacher perceptions varied considerably about issues to do with continuity between early childhood services and school. One teacher placed a high value on information being passed on from early childhood services saying,

problems can be detected early ... important that the preschool teacher passes this information on to the school,

and another teacher indicated her strong belief in the importance of communication with early childhood services:

We need to have strong links with all early childhood services in order to work more effectively for our students and families. Our transition program is excellent – visits to preschool occur prior to commencement of this program, and we have an Information Day for parents [which] includes visits from other services

Yet another mentioned the value of communication with early childhood services, especially when working with children who have issues or problems which have been detected prior to coming to school. This teacher said,

We can have programs in place prior to the child commencing school after meetings with early childhood services and parents about specific issues/problems with individual students. This helps us greatly and makes the child's transition to school smooth and less stressful.

In one case where the early childhood service and the school had not been encouraged to communicate with one another, problems occurred. This teacher said that,

We had a severely violent child come to this school with no warning from the preschool. We had one serious incident after another. When I called the Preschool, the teacher indicated the child had difficulties during the preschool year.

The teacher continued...

The Preschools need to contact the School and the parents need to be involved if there is a particular difficulty with a child. In this way, with a really good preschool, you can meet and go through a child's history, apply for funding in order to have a teacher's aid ready for the start of the year. You can have a program in place which benefits everyone particularly the child.

This contrasts with other perspectives where the prior to school experience is not seen to be relevant in providing any continuity of experience and information flow.

Our base line starts when they start school. Our baseline isn't from preschool. Some preschools give us reports which I read with reluctance. Usually they give them to me if they are very anxious parents. I usually read ... to see what the parent is anxious about... so they don't think I'm

being arrogant by not reading. I don't actually want to be coloured by someone else's perspective of a child.

Research Question 4:

What is the relationship between quality of the early childhood experience and children's skills, competencies and development on commencing school?

Teachers' comments did not address the question of quality in early childhood services, despite trigger questions which encouraged them to look at how early childhood services can benefit children's early school experiences. However, some inferences can be made about their perceptions of quality and its impact on children's skills, competencies and development on commencement of school. Comments such as, "*I suppose it depends on who's running it*" would seem to indicate that there is an understanding of the importance of appropriate teacher training and personal characteristics. Whilst the comment that "*I would recommend preschools with structured, specific programs aimed at skill development in preparation for school*" suggests a very particular view of the role of preschools, one that was shared by a number of the teachers interviewed.

In summary the key findings of discussions with teachers in the schools were:

- 1. That most children in their classes were socially well prepared for school and that this preparedness was generally attributed to their previous experience in early childhood services.*
- 2. That effective parenting and strong family backgrounds were also perceived to have played a part in preparing many of the children for school.*
- 3. That children from difficult family situations were more at risk than those with stable family lives.*
- 4. While most teachers focused on children's social skills and their ability to interact with peers rather than motor abilities and understandings about literacy and numeracy, they attributed print and number concepts development to their early childhood experiences.*
- 5. That most teachers believed in the importance of creating links between early childhood services and schools to support effective transitions to school for young children.*

6. *That for some teachers forming their own opinion of the children in their classes based on their observations over several weeks is preferable to making assumptions based on early childhood reports.*
7. *In the few situations where links between schools and early childhood services are established, these relationships are highly valued.*
8. *That most teachers perceived a strong distinction between care and education programs and did not show an awareness of the education dimension in early childhood services other than preschool.*

Section 5

Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 – Conclusions

The data collected through this research has been analysed to address four research questions.

- What is the extent of children’s participation in formal early childhood prior to school services in the Blue Mountains post code area 2780?
- What are parent’s perceptions of the barriers and enablers of children’s participation in these programs?
- How does participation in these early childhood services relate to parent and teacher perceptions of children’s skills, competencies and development, at the commencement of formal schooling?
- What is the relationship between quality of the early childhood experience and children’s skills, competencies and development on commencing school?

The results indicate that **children’s participation** in formal and informal early childhood prior to school services, amongst the survey participants in the Blue Mountains post code area 2780 is high (93.3%), indeed considerably higher than the nation’s average according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2005). ABS figures show that around 53% of three year olds are in formal care, including long day care, preschool and family day care but interestingly this figure drops to 38% for four year olds. Nationwide participation in playgroups is not quite so clear, but as relatively few of the participants in this research (10.7%) had accessed playgroups, removal of this group from the statistics still indicates a higher than average take up rate of formal early childhood services in this post code area. Given the diversity of the population in the target postcode area in terms of socioeconomic status, work status and educational levels, the high participation rate appears to be an anomaly. Moreover, while only 60% of the distributed surveys were returned, which could indicate that child care users were disproportionately represented amongst the respondents, comments from teachers suggest otherwise. Teachers commented that “most” children had been to preschool, although this term was consistently used to represent the full range of prior to school services in the area.

What the results also indicate is that the profile of young families in this study is atypical and reflects an element of lifestyle choice. For example, many of the respondents had high levels of education, but relatively low levels of income. As the majority of the surveyed population also have English as a first language (survey data), there appears to be limited cultural diversity in this sample. It is likely therefore, that many families share Western understandings of the value of early experiences prior to the commencement of school and have made some kind of early childhood education a priority for their children, even given its high cost. This would appear to be one explanation for the high take up rate of early childhood services amongst a group where, while the majority of children live in two parent households, in less than half these households, both parents are employed.

This is also consistent with the findings that show that parents and most teachers consider early childhood services to be beneficial to young children as they transition to school, irrespective of the type of service accessed or the length of time across a week children attended the service. While parents mentioned a range of services their children had used prior to starting school including long day care, family day care, playgroup, supported playgroup and preschool, as previously noted, teachers were more inclined to speak generically of services as “preschool” only.

Teachers were generally complimentary of the work accomplished by early childhood educators and recognised the high level of training many of these had undertaken. While most teachers felt there was a need for communication between early childhood services and school to facilitate transitions, a couple of teachers did not want to read information relating to children, preferring to make their own assessment of the children in their classes rather than forming opinions based on other’s opinions or early childhood reports. Although it is commendable that teachers do not want to label children based on previous reports, there is much research (Hopps, 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2004) to show that continuity between children’s experiences in the years prior to school and at commencement of school benefits children and facilitates smoother transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2001). This involves acceptance of the professionalism of both groups of teachers, those in prior to school services and those in the school system.

What was perceived as important for starting school was generally consistent across parents and teachers. Both groups expressed their desire for children to be socially

competent and placed stress on their ability to get along with others, be ready to follow rules, to toilet themselves and being ready to learn. The work of Dockett and Perry (Dockett, Perry & Tracey, 1997; Dockett & Perry, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2004) has consistently highlighted a reasonable degree of congruence amongst parent and teacher responses in their research over many years. Some teachers however, felt that parents were overly concerned about the need for their children to have a range of skills, such as some letter recognition, numeracy and use of scissors. One parent even commented that preschool should be valued more for its social benefits, than for its academic value and that high structure in early childhood services was not always necessary. Meaningful communication is needed to alleviate false understandings between families and teachers, for the ultimate welfare of children. This can only be built however, on trust and respect, with recognition of the contribution of all stakeholders in the transition experience (Dockett & Perry, 2001).

The barriers to early childhood services appear to focus on issues related to transport, the high costs for families of early childhood education services, the availability of places, lack of information and misgivings about the value of some early childhood experiences. These include false assumptions about the efficacy of preschool over long day care, accreditation of preschools and definitions of quality as it relates to care and education.

Although most respondents indicated that they had access to private transport, others did not and expressed their frustration with the lack of public transport, and with other infrastructure problems associated with being able to access services. These included the difficulties of getting on and off buses and trains, especially in wet weather and with a number of young children. Wet weather gear was needed to ensure that children were kept dry and some families opted to stay at home when the weather was inclement rather than battle the elements with their children. Parents also commented on the lack of defined pathways and pedestrian crossings in some parts of the area in which the research was conducted. These, they noted, posed significant safety hazards and fears were expressed for themselves and their children in these conditions. This is a serious consideration for a community caring for its citizens and concerned about their social and welfare benefits, and are issues for discussion at local government level.

Cost was constantly expressed as stress factor by families who had accessed formal early childhood services as well as those who had not. “More funding”, “greater affordability” and “more resources from the Government”, were factors which were thought likely to make services better. It was the high cost of child care which influenced some of the parents’ decisions to use free playgroups or to minimise the number of days their children attended the service they used. With costs varying considerably depending on the services used and the subsidies available, between \$18 - \$60 per day (parent focus group data), this is not surprising. A number of parents indicated that they had given up working as most of their salaries had been paid out in childcare costs. Parents indicated that while early childhood education, particularly preschool should be available for all children, increased government benefits for early childhood services are also essential.

Availability of services was mentioned, although more as a short term barrier to access when people moved into the area, rather than as a permanent factor. Some parents mentioned the need for extended hours and even weekend services. Other families commented on the need for better information about services or remarked on overly long waiting lists as well as access to the days which best suited them.

Some parents felt there should be more preschools and greater funded access to them. This seems to be fuelled by the perception that only preschools and not quality long day care programs, offer the skills necessary for children commencing school. In reality both preschools and long day care services must meet mandatory requirements for licensing. Furthermore while long day care services undergo a system of accreditation for ascertaining quality, at the moment this does not apply to preschool services.

Misgivings about services was a common theme. Although all parents indicated general satisfaction with their immediate past experiences (the service they had accessed for their child immediately prior to commencement at school), they were not always complimentary of previously used services. For example, while there were a few comments about space, flexibility and programming, parents said that they loved the centres they had just left. With respect to earlier experiences however, there were criticisms of individual services or types of service relating to staff, resources, facilities, organisation, flexibility, food and educational foci. Amongst respondents, criticism was

inconsistent however, with no single service or type of service standing out. Some families expressed concerns about particular services, while other families loved them.

In this instance it is difficult to conclude that misgivings about services related to anything other than personal preference and perceptions although such behaviour is not uncommon and apparent satisfaction with what others might find unsatisfactory, especially when it relates to matters of great personal importance, such as the welfare of children, is well documented in the literature. It is likely that situations about which people feel uncomfortable, but over which they feel they have little control, arouse feelings of “cognitive dissonance” (Elliott & Devine, 1994). In order to alleviate this discomfort (e.g. less than 100% satisfaction about a care situation), a dissonance-reduction strategy is implemented. This simply means that there is an attitudinal change which allows acceptance of a situation where misgivings might previously have existed. When children are finally removed from a situation which parents may have perceived as an unsatisfactory environment, they regain a degree of agency and then feel free to voice their concerns.

What can be concluded here is that there is not a “one size fits all” type of service, that not every service will suit all children and families. What is required however is that all services are staffed by well trained, confident and competent early childhood educators who are able to modify their curricula to take account of the diversity existing within the community. As Dockett and Perry (2001) note, the strength of early childhood services and their ability to support children’s transitions to school lies in the quality and the training of staff.

The enabling of full participation in early childhood services was generally linked to what were perceived as positive cost factors, flexibility and convenience. Many parents noted the benefits of funding for childcare and expressed the belief that it was funding which had enabled any participation in early childhood services. This does not mean that families were always able to access services on the days and times they desired, but it did mean that what might otherwise be unobtainable, became a viable option for many children, even if for only one day per week.

With respect to enablers, parents also mentioned that flexibility with regard to extended hours allowed them to make full use of services whilst continuing to work or study. Several parents appreciated the convenience of having an early childhood service adjacent to the school where the child was to attend, or where other children attended. In some cases this meant one drop off point for several children or was seen as an effective way for children to develop understandings about school and its requirements.

Overwhelmingly, what parents liked best about their children's early childhood experiences were related to staff's professionalism and care, "wonderful teachers", their "nurturing manner", "the happy and positive environment" and the "excellent communication and early intervention offered by expert staff." That these were undoubtedly enablers to participation in early childhood services is highly likely.

As previously mentioned **teachers' and parents' perceptions of children's desired skills, competencies and development**, at the commencement of formal schooling were similar in many respects. Certainly each were more concerned about children's social readiness for school than understandings of literacy and numeracy, although a grounding based on previous family and early childhood experiences of these were thought to be advantageous. The ability to toilet oneself was also seen as an advantage as was self-confidence in a new situation.

In most cases teachers and parents alike attributed children's school readiness to their experiences prior to school, developed within early childhood services or the context of their families and homes. Some teachers were dismissive of reports generated in settings however, preferring to form their own opinions of children rather than base these on others' perceptions. Parents were generally confident that services had supported children's transition to school, especially children who had been in a "preschool" program. Indeed some parents had withdrawn their children from services they felt did not offer such a program and enrolled them in "preschool" to ensure that they would have the skills, competencies and development necessary as they started school.

Most teachers indicated that the children in their groups had settled well at the commencement of the year, bringing with them a degree of maturity and self-sufficiency as well as useful skills such as recognition of their own names, and the ability to cut and

colour. Ackerman and Barnett (2005) go a step further arguing that instead of just focusing on school ready children, schools need to be “ready schools”, offering supportive programs which lessen the cultural, linguistic or contextual constraints that make adjustment difficult. They go on to note the importance of creating links with children’s preschool educators and because many children will have had experience in a range of different services, they believe that teachers in schools must modify their instructional practices to be more responsive to children’s individual needs (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005).

The results suggest that there is a lack of effective communication between kindergarten teachers in schools and educators in early childhood services which is not uncommon (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2001). Ready schools however will be mindful of the need for good communication between all stakeholders, will have effective transition programs in place for all children and will recognise the benefits of early childhood trained teachers in kindergarten classrooms to provide continuity for children and their families.

Of considerable concern is the continuing perception that most early childhood services, other than preschools, offer little in the way of educational programs for children. This is seen as a serious issue for parents who believe that a “preschool” experience will be more beneficial to their children as preparation for school than what is currently offered by services labelled “long day care” or “family day care”. Haddad (2001) notes the early childhood “field’s long struggle for identity against a set of ideological, political and economic forces acting to weaken and inhibit its development” (p. 5). This continues to vex early childhood educators who have laboured long to promote the educational, social, emotional, physical and cognitive aspects offered by early childhood services, within a context of care, for all children and their families.

The care/education dichotomy continues to divide. Whilst it may be a false dichotomy, it persists in the mind of many parents, communities, school teachers and even amongst early childhood educators (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2004). It is based on an assumption that the educational requirements for preschools and long day care services differ and it is perpetuated in the nomenclature associated with services which label those who work in preschools as teachers, while those working in childcare are carers or caregivers.

Although there is a two tiered tertiary educational system operating in Australia, which offers early childhood training at Diploma level (2 year course at TAFE or equivalent) or at Bachelors or Master of Teaching level (minimum 4 year degree or 3 year degree followed by minimum 18 months at graduate level) from a University, most programs for four year olds are staffed by University trained teachers.

It is not surprising therefore that there is a lack of community awareness of the value of early childhood education when what service types offer is not well understood. This is an issue which needs more research but also sustained attention to address the situation.

What has not been clearly identified in this study is the question of the **relationship between the quality of children's early childhood experience and their skills, competencies and development on commencing school**. Without mapping all the services accessed by children commencing school in to 2780 postcode area, using a range of validated instruments, discussing quality in services is problematic given the limitations of current licensing and accreditation systems. Certainly the link between children's experiences and their skills, competencies and development is not able to be discerned at this stage. Even given families' perceptions of quality as interpreted by analysis of their responses, this is insufficient to make any kind of judgement at this stage, particularly when noted that quality in early childhood services is a multi-faceted and relative concept based on values and beliefs (Friendly et al, 2006).

What the literature does show is that specific components are necessary to ensure program quality. Wangmann (1995) has grouped these components into two categories, namely those that contribute to quality, and those that determine quality. This is reinforced by Press (2006) who notes that the interaction of these two dimensions in the provision of good quality early childhood environments which support children's development, is essential.

The results of this study have highlighted some anomalies in this small community. For example, with respect to greater than expected participation in early childhood services, these include

- higher than average educational qualifications amongst participants,

- families willing to invest in what they perceive as important for their children prior to their commencement at school in spite of the high cost.

What is not surprising, given the findings of previous well documented research, is that:

- there is minimal communication between early childhood services and schools,
- the differences and similarities in the educational content of preschools and other early childhood services is not well understood,
- irrespective of the type of service their children attended immediately prior to school, families expressed satisfaction with the experiences accessed.

5.2 – Limitations of Study

This research was conducted as a pilot in one post-code area. Therefore the results are indicative of emerging issues and concerns.

While the response rate to the completion of the questionnaires was acceptable (60%) in research terms, the non-response factor also needs to be considered. Some researchers consider the reasons for non-response as important as the responses themselves. Goyder, Warriner, Coutts and Basic (1999) note that the topic under consideration will always influence response behaviour, although other factors such as interest and competence (Haraldsen, Stålnacke & Fosen, 1999) need to be recognised. In the case of this study, while there is an assumption that all families have an interest in the preparedness of their children at the commencement of school, whether or not those families made use of prior to school early childhood services, some families are likely to have self-disqualified on the basis that they did not access such services. In this situation it is likely that self-evaluations of whether people were qualified to answer, or their perceived competence to respond in this instance, influenced the decision to participate. Future research would be designed to capture data from families who did not use early childhood services.

All respondents to the questionnaires had accessed some kind of early childhood experience for their children. Without a higher response rate, it is not possible to determine the take up rate of early childhood places amongst the remainder of the population of kindergarten parents in postcode 2780, nor to fully assess the barriers and enablers to early childhood education services.

Given that this was a small pilot study we were not able to investigate the levels of quality in the early childhood programs using validated instruments.

5.3 – Recommendations

The findings of this study together with the international research literature underpinning the project draw attention to the emerging issues and possibilities for the Blue Mountains Community.

With this in mind the research team makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1:

That further research needs to be undertaken using the findings of this pilot study as a basis for a more nuanced, comprehensive and complex studies. This would involve:

- **a comprehensive literature review**
- **refinement of research questions and instruments**
- **inclusion of assessment of quality of early childhood services using validated instruments**

Such studies may include:

- **mapping all child and family services in the Blue Mountains region**
- **assessing their quality using a range of validated instruments designed for this purpose.**
- **identifying gaps in service provision**
- **documenting innovative practices and formation of relationships**
- **exploring the development of a strong transition to school program**
- **action research in sites of change and change management**

Recommendation 2:

That partnerships for research be formed between Blue Mountains City Council together with a research team from the University of Western Sydney and a number of research/funding partners such as DoCS and the DET, to develop an application for an ARC funded project.

Recommendation 3:

That a Community Education and Information Program about the value and importance of early childhood education and a range of services be developed and implemented across the Blue Mountains local government region.

Recommendation 4:

That consideration be given to the application of the AEDI in supporting social planning and teachers planning for children’s development.

Recommendation 5:

That as part of a social sustainability strategy, serious exploration of models of comprehensive early childhood systems be undertaken in the region. Such exploration would include attention to schools as community “Hubs”. A component of any integrated model needs to include consideration of speech services.

Recommendation 6:

That the findings of this study be used to inform state and federal policy.

Section 6

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Letter to School Principals

The Principal
XXXXXX Public School
Blue Mountains

Partnerships in Learning: *Linking children, families and early childhood services*

A research project exploring barriers to and facilitators of participation in early childhood programs and services in the Blue Mountains

Dear

We are writing to seek your involvement and support in a research project being conducted by researchers from the University of Western Sydney in conjunction with the Blue Mountains City Council.

The research project aims to explore access and equity issues in early childhood services in the Blue Mountains and to map critical pathways to children achieving good developmental outcomes on starting school. Early childhood services include preschools, centre-based long day care, family day care, occasional care, supported playgroups and mobile services.

As you are probably aware, access to quality pre-school education is highly correlated with school success and positive socio-economic adult outcomes making this a strategic direction for the BMCC in achieving social sustainability.

This project is designed as a small scale study contained by the boundaries of one postcode area in the Blue Mountains. The study is a pilot for a larger study planned to determine the critical pathways to early childhood education throughout the area covered by the Blue Mountains City Council. Further details about the project are in an attachment to this letter.

The research plan has been approved by the DET Research and Analysis Unit. The main components of the data collection are:

1. **Parent Survey and Questionnaire.** The parent survey seeks demographic information, as well as parent perspectives on the various early childhood settings they might have used and the choices they were able to make about what services to use. We are interested in what were the enablers or barriers to participation in these services in the year before their child commenced school. The short questionnaire (PEDS) asks parents about their perceptions of their child's development. It is a validated instrument now being used across Australia. The full name of this questionnaire is Parental Evaluation of Developmental Status. We want to survey only parents of children commencing school in 2006.
2. **Parent Discussion Group.** We would like to hold some small discussion groups with interested parents, at a time to be negotiated with individual schools. The

purpose is to explore in greater depth parental experiences of early childhood services and issues associated with access or lack of access and availability. .

3. **Teacher Interviews.** We would like to also talk to teachers about their views concerning the role of early childhood services in preparing children for school.
The children themselves will not be directly involved

We will be establishing a steering group for the project which will have membership from the Blue Mountains City Council and departmental representation from both DoCS and DET. The project has approvals from the UWS Ethics Committee and the research will be conducted within the protocols established for the ethical conduct of research, as required by DET and UWS. All data collected will be treated confidentially and names of schools and participants will not be identified in any reports coming out of the project.

We are aware of the many pressures on school resources and staff time. However we hope that your school will be able to participate in what we believe is an important research project for the Blue Mountains community. If you agree to participate, as we hope you will, the arrangements for how the research is conducted will be negotiated with individual schools in ways that suit them better. We are keen to minimize the impact on staff in schools and make it as easy as possible to manage.

Specifically we are asking your assistance in the following:

- Publicising the project through your school newsletter and encouraging the participation of parents and kindergarten teachers ,
- Allowing access to the school for distribution and collection of parent surveys and questionnaires,
- Use of school facilities to conduct group discussions with parents and teachers.

Ideally, we would like to distribute the questionnaires in late February/early March, and complete the data collection phase of the project by the end of Term 1.

We will be contacting you shortly to make arrangements for a meeting to discuss your school's possible participation in the project.

In the meantime, if you have any further questions about the research, please don't hesitate to contact the research team through the Research Officer for the project, Ms Lin Brown.: email l.j.brown@uws.edu.au Phone 47360273.

Yours sincerely

Tanya James
Children & Family Services Development Officer
Blue Mountains City Council

Assoc Professor Christine Woodrow
Head of Early Childhood
University of Western Sydney

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officers (tel: 02 47 360 883). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

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| Information Statement for Parents |
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Partnerships in learning: *Linking children, families and early childhood services*

A project exploring barriers to and facilitators of participation in early childhood programs and services in the Blue Mountains

Researchers from the University of Western Sydney are working with the Blue Mountains City Council to better understand how and why people use or do not use early childhood services. These services include preschools, day care, family day care, supported playgroups and mobiles.

The findings of this study will allow government and non-government agencies to be better informed as they plan early childhood services for the Blue Mountains community.

We are hoping that all parents of children starting school for the first time in 2006 will participate in this study. What we plan to do in the study is:

- Look at what makes it easy for parents to find services for their children and what makes it hard
- Talk to parents about why they chose a particular service
- Talk to both parents who used early childhood services as well as those who did not
- Talk to parents about their understanding of their child's development on starting school

In gathering this information together the study has two main parts:

1. Surveys.

These surveys can be filled in and returned to the school. You do not need to put your name of the surveys, but because we need to match survey forms with other information we are gathering, the forms will have a coded number. We estimate it will take about half an hour to complete the surveys.

2. A group discussion with parents

Parents who fill in the surveys may also like to participate in a group discussion later in the study. Through your school we will provide you with information about these meetings. The meetings will take about one hour.

We believe this is an important project for the Blue Mountain community. Your help will be invaluable to make sure we get a good understanding of what families have experienced and what they need.

All the information collected in this study will be stored in locked cupboards at the University of Western Sydney. The information stored will not have your name recorded and you or your child will never be identified in any reports that come out of the project.

All the researchers involved in this project are employed by the University of Western Sydney, are experienced researchers, have a commitment to the ethical conduct of research and are vitally interested in the provision of quality early childhood services to Australian children and their families.

For any question about this research, contact details are listed below.

Research Officer, Ms Linda Brown, School of Education, University of Western Sydney.

Email: l.j.brown@uws.edu.au

Phone: 47360272

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officers (tel: 02 47 360 883). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Consent form for parent focus groups

Partnerships in Learning: *Linking children, families and early childhood services*

Ihave read the information sheet outlining the project and understand what my involvement would be.

I consent to participating in a focus group with other parents to discuss how my child settled into kindergarten, what I thought was necessary to prepare him/her for school and my thoughts about early childhood services, and whether or not I used them before my child commenced school. (*Early Childhood services may include centre-based long day care, family day care, preschools, supported playgroups, occasional care and mobile centres*).

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary; that I will not be identified in any way, in any report or presentation associated with the study, and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Name.....

Signature..... Date

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officers (tel: 02 47 360 883). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

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| Information Statement for Teachers |
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Partnerships in Learning: *Linking children, families and early childhood services*

A project exploring barriers to and facilitators of participation in early childhood programs and services in the Blue Mountains

Researchers from the University of Western Sydney are working with the Blue Mountains City Council to better understand parents use of early childhood services in the year before their child starts school. Early childhood services include preschools, centre-based long day care, family day care, occasional care, supported playgroups and mobile services. The findings of the study will allow government and non-government agencies to be better informed as they plan early childhood services for the Blue Mountains community.

We would appreciate your assistance in this project in two ways. Firstly, we would like you to assist us in encouraging parents to participate in the study, and secondly we would like to talk to you. We are interested in your perspectives concerning the role, importance and availability of early childhood services for children in the year before they start school.

We would like to hold individual interviews with kindergarten teachers. If you agree, these will be held at a mutually convenient time in April. The interview would be recorded and then transcribed. The tapes will then be destroyed. No names will be recorded in the written record of the discussion.

As part of this project, we will also be surveying parents and holding some parent discussion groups.

All information in this study will be stored in locked cupboards at the University of Western Sydney. The information stored will not have any names recorded and you will never be identified in any reports that come out of this study.

We believe this is an important project for the Blue Mountains community. We request your assistance to make sure that we get a good understanding of relevant issues in the provision of appropriate early childhood education programs.

If you have any questions about the study, below are the contact details for the project.

Research Officer. Ms Lin Brown. School of Education, University of Western Sydney.
Email l.j.brown@uws.edu.au Phone 47360273.

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officers (tel: 02 47 360 883). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Consent form for teacher interviews

Partnerships in Learning: *Linking children, families and early childhood services*

Ihave read the information sheet outlining the project and understand what my involvement would be.

I give consent to being interviewed at a time mutually convenient to the researcher and myself about how the children in my kindergarten class were prepared for school this year, perceivable differences in their preparedness and about my thoughts concerning prior to school services for children in this region (*Early childhood services may include centre-based long day care, family day care, preschools, supported playgroups, occasional care and mobile centres*).

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary; that I will not be identified in any way, in any report or presentation associated with the study, and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Name.....

Signature..... Date

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officers (tel: 02 47 360 883). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

6. Is your child of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background?

Yes

No

7. How many children live in your home? _____

8. How many of the children living in your home fall into the following age ranges:

| | Number of children |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| 0 - 2 years | _____ |
| 3 yrs - 5 yrs | _____ |
| 6 yrs -12 yrs | _____ |
| 13 yrs - 17 yrs | _____ |

9. How many adults live in your home? _____

10. How many of the adults living in your home fall into the following age ranges:

| | Number of adults |
|-----------------|------------------|
| 18 yrs - 25 yrs | _____ |
| 26 yrs - 39 yrs | _____ |
| 40 yrs - 60 yrs | _____ |
| 61 yrs & over | _____ |

11. How many adults living in your household have work outside the home? _____

12. Do any of the adults in your household look after your child on a **regular** basis (for example when you are at work, studying)?

Yes No

If yes, was this a large part of your childcare arrangements before your child started school?

13. Do you have other family members or friends who look after your child on a regular basis?

Yes No

If yes, was this a large part of your childcare arrangements before your child started school?

14. How long have you lived in the Blue Mountains area?

Less than a year
Between 1 and 2 years
Between 2 years 1 month and 5 years
More than 5 years

15. Do you have a car available for your use during the day? (e.g. to take your child to day care or preschool?)

Yes No

16. What is your highest level of education?

High school
TAFE

University

Other (Please specify) _____

17. What is your partner's highest level of education?

High school

TAFE

University

Other (Please specify) _____

PART 2: Information about the early childhood services you used

18. Please fill in the following table to show what early childhood services you used with your child who has just started school. If you used none of these services please indicate this below.

We did not use any early childhood services

If you did not use any of these services, please go to Question 21

| Service Type | Tick the services you used | How old was your child when you first used this service? | For how long did you use the service? | On a scale of 1 to 4, how satisfied were you with the service? 1 = very dissatisfied 2 = dissatisfied 3 = satisfied 4 = very satisfied |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Family Day Care | | | | |
| Supported Playgroup (<i>teacher present</i>) | | | | |
| Mobile Playgroup | | | | |
| Long Day Care | | | | |
| Preschool | | | | |
| Occasional Care | | | | |

19. On a scale of 1 to 4, how important were the following in your deciding to use these early childhood services?

**1 = Not important at all 2 = A little bit important 3 = Quite important
4 = Very important**

| | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| a. To prepare my child for school | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| b. So that my child would learn more | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| c. To help my child learn English | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| d. I wanted my child to make more friends | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| e. It gave me the time I need to go to work or to have a break | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| f. So I could meet other parents | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| g. So I could learn more about how to teach my child | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| h. Other reasons (Please state) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

20. On a scale of 1 to 4, how important were the following in your decision to use the particular services you did?

**1 = Not important at all 2 = A little bit important 3 = Quite important
4 = Very important**

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Close to my home and so convenient | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| b. Close to my work and so convenient | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| c. Easy to get to | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| d. The staff were friendly | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| e. I wanted my child to attend services that included children with special needs | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| f. Good resources | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| g. Good reputation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| h. Suggested by an early intervention worker | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| i. I knew other people from my area whose children went there | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| j. The staff respected my family's values | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| k. Affordable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| l. Had place for my child | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| m. Other reasons (Please state) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|

21. **For those who did not use childcare services.**

On a scale of 1 to 4, how important were the following in your decision NOT to use childcare services for this child?

1 = Not important at all 2 = A little bit important 3 = Quite important

4 = Very important

| | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| a. Too far from home and so not convenient | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| b. Too far from work and so not convenient | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| c. Hard to get to | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| d. The staff were not friendly | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| e. Children with special needs were not included | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| f. Poor resources | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| g. Poor reputation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| h. I didn't know anyone whose children went there | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| i. The staff were not respectful of my family's values | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| j. Too expensive | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| k. No places available for my child | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| l. I wanted to care for my child myself | | | | |
| m. Other reasons (Please state) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

22. What did you like best about the services you used?

23. What would make these services better?

24. What would have helped you make greater use of childcare services?

25. Are there any other comments that you would like to make about childcare services?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

PEDS RESPONSE FORM

Child's Name _____ Parent's Name _____

Child's Birthday _____ Child's Age _____ Today's Date _____

1. Please list any concerns about your child's learning, development, and behaviour.

2. Do you have any concerns about how your child talks and makes speech sounds?

Circle one: No Yes A little COMMENTS:

3. Do you have any concerns about how your child understands what you say?

Circle one: No Yes A little COMMENTS:

4. Do you have any concerns about how your child uses his or her hands and fingers to do things?

Circle one: No Yes A little COMMENTS:

5. Do you have any concerns about how your child uses his or her arms and legs?

Circle one: No Yes A little COMMENTS:

6. Do you have any concerns about how your child behaves?

Circle one: No Yes A little COMMENTS:

7. Do you have any concerns about how your child gets along with others?

Circle one: No Yes A little COMMENTS:

8. Do you have any concerns about how your child is learning to do things for himself/herself?

Circle one: No Yes A little COMMENTS:

9. Do you have any concerns about how your child is learning preschool or school skills?

Circle one: No Yes A little COMMENTS:

10. Please list any other concerns.

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Sample questions for focus groups with parents

Partnerships in Learning: *Linking children, families and early childhood services*

1. What do you see as important for children starting school?
2. How well has your child settled at school this year?
3. What do you think has helped your child prepare for school?
4. Can you talk about what you see as some of the advantages or disadvantages of using early childhood services? (*Early childhood services may include centre-based long day care, family day care, preschools, supported playgroups, occasional care and mobile centres*)
5. What early childhood services were available in your area and can you tell me whether you used them or not?
6. If you used early childhood services, would you have used them more frequently if that were possible?
7. If you did use childcare services, what were the benefits?
8. Were there other services that you would have taken advantage of, if you had been able to do so?
9. If you did not use early childhood services, can you talk about why this was so?
10. What would have made things easier for you to be able to use the early childhood services in your region?
11. How would you advise other parents about what they should do with their children in the years prior to school?
12. What other supports would you have liked to see in your community?

Sample questions for discussion with teachers

Partnerships in Learning: *Linking children, families and early childhood services*

1. How well do you think your students were prepared for the start of school this year?
2. What are some of the factors that contribute to children being prepared for school?
3. What are some of the differences you have noticed in children and their preparedness for school?
4. Can you tell me about the different skills that children bring with them to school?
5. Have you noticed whether children who have had experiences in early childhood services display different skills to those who have not used any services (*these may include centre-based long day care, family day care, preschools, supported playgroups, occasional care and mobile centres*)?
6. What kinds of early childhood services would you recommend to parents as being valuable in helping children develop some of the skills necessary for school?
7. What links have you made or feel you need to make with early childhood services that help with children settling well at school?

List of Participants in Research Steering Committee

Partnerships in Learning: Linking children, families and
early childhood services

Steering Committee Membership (from August 2006)

| | Institution | Nominated Person | Position | Contact Details |
|---|-----------------|--|---|---|
| 1 | DET | John McGregor Representatives Anne Bahnisch Michelle Lawrow | School Education Director BM Principal Principal | Western Sydney Region Penrith Office 51 Henry Street (cnr Evan St) Penrith 2750 Tel: (02) 4724 8799 carolyn.j.kendall@det.nsw.edu.au Blackheath Public School: (02) 4787 8253 blackheath-p.school@det.nsw.edu.au Katoomba North Public School: (02) 4782 2742 katoomban-p.school@det.nsw.edu.au |
| 2 | DoCS | Robynne Cole | Regional Director | Department of Community Service NEPEAN NETWORK OFFICE PO Box 740 Penrith NSW 2750 robynne.cole@community.nsw.gov.au |
| 3 | DoCS | Karen Van Woudenberg | Families First CPO | Department of Community Service Nepean Network Office PO Box 740 Penrith NSW 2750 karen.vanwoudenberg@community.nsw.gov.au |
| 4 | DoCS | Faye Lewis | CSA Blue Mountains | Department of Community Service Nepean Network Office PO Box 740 Penrith NSW 2750 Lewis, Faye [Faye.Lewis@community.nsw.gov.au] |
| 5 | BMCC | Rosemary Dillon | Manager, Corporate Planning | BMCC Locked Bag 1005 Katoomba NSW 2780 Nora Adam Technical Assistant [nadam@bmcc.nsw.gov.au] rdillan@bmcc.nsw.gov.au |
| 6 | Private Schools | Mark Thomas | Principal | Korowal School Limited 77 Scott Avenue Leura NSW 2780 (02) 4757 2253 info@korowal.nsw.edu.au |
| 7 | Public Schools | Dennise Lawless | Kindergarten Teacher | Katoomba Public School Merriwa Street Katoomba. NSW. 2780 ph: (02) 4782 1226 Work fax (02) 4782 2996 katoomba-p.school@det.nsw.edu.au tel: (02) 4759 1579 |
| 8 | EC Centres | Dianne Jackson | Manager | Connect Child and Family Services, Bungarebee Centre, 48-50 Oaklands Road, Hazelbrook. NSW. 2779 dianne.jackson@connect.asn.au |