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AUTHOR   Hughes, Patrick; MacNaughton, Glenda
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ABSTRACT
        International research has consistently found that early
childhood staff are anxious about their relationships with parents. This
qualitative study examined the perceptions of early childhood staff from a
variety of early childhood settings in Australia regarding their experiences
with the federal government's Quality Improvement and Accreditation Scheme
(QIAS). The study focused on their perceptions of the requirement for centers
to involve parents in their programs. Participating in this ongoing study
thus far have been 15 staff from 3 centers from diverse areas in Australia.
Most participants had formal training in early childhood education and were
Anglo-Australian. Data were collected by means of a structured questionnaire,
semi-structured focus group discussions, and telephone interviews with
individuals. Four interpretive case studies were generated, each highlighting
key communication strategies that staff associated with "good" parent
involvement practices: (1) disclosing personal information about family life;
(2) parents understanding and respecting the professional's knowledge about
the child; (3) parents revealing ignorance as much as their expertise; and
(4) parents offering resources to the center. The findings revealed that
participants were consistently ambivalent about involving parents in their
program because developing a shared understanding with parents about what was
in the best interests of their child was neither easy nor guaranteed. Staff
often dismissed QIAS requirements for formal written communication,
preferring informal verbal communication because it allowed them to negotiate
shared meanings with parents. Findings pose implications for the
knowledge-power relation between parents and staff. (Contains 16 references.)
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BUILDING EQUITABLE STAFF-PARENT COMMUNICATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS: AN AUSTRALIAN CASE STUDY

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Dr. Patrick Hughes
School of Literary and Communication Studies
Deakin University
Geelong 3217
Australia
Tel.: 61 + 352 272 701
Fax: 61 + 352 272 484
e-mail: patrickh@deakin.edu.au

Dr. Glenda MacNaughton
Department of Learning and Educational Development
The University of Melbourne
Parkville 3052
Australia
Tel.: 61 + 393440985
Fax: 61 + 393440995
e-mail: g.macnaughton@edfac.unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT

International research has consistently found that early childhood staff are anxious about their relationships with parents. Early childhood staff from a variety of settings in Australia were asked about their experiences of the federal government's Quality Improvement and Accreditation Scheme (QIAS), which requires centers to involve parents in their programs. Drawing on those interviews, this paper considers communication strategies to create professional and equitable relationships between staff and parents.

BUILDING EQUITABLE STAFF-PARENT COMMUNICATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS: AN AUSTRALIAN CASE STUDY

1. THE BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY.

In Australia, good staff-parent communication is an element of the federal government's Quality Improvement and Accreditation Scheme (QIAS) that specifies standards and conditions that centers must meet to be eligible for government funding and formal accreditation. QIAS is meant to create strong partnerships between staff and parents. Among other things, the Scheme requires a centre to involve the parents in planning its programs, administering its services and evaluating their quality. To achieve accreditation, centres must be seen to implement four key principles of quality:

- Principle 10: "There is verbal and written communication with all families about the centre."
- Principle 11: "There is an active exchange of information between parents and staff."
- Principle 13: "Parents and other family members are encouraged to be involved in the program."
- Principle 48: "Staff and parents consult on the program and evaluate it together."

No formal evaluation of the success or failure of the QIAS has yet been published. The study we are reporting on today is the first stage of a longer-term project that explores early childhood staff views about the QIAS standards and criteria concerning staff-parent communication. In the present study, were interested in what early childhood staff thought about the QIAS standards and conditions concerning staff-parent communication.

RESEARCH METHODS.

The present study addressed two questions:

- How do early childhood staff in Australian QIAS-accredited child care services understand and practice parent involvement?
- How can we best theorize these understandings?

Research techniques.

We addressed these questions through a small, exploratory, qualitative research study of 15 early childhood staff. A further 10 staff will join the study during April and May. We used three techniques to collect empirical data about staffs' understandings and practices concerning parent involvement:

- A structured confidential, self-completed questionnaire, in which participants described their pre-service training and cultural background and detailed their views about (1) good parent involvement practices, (2) effective communication with parents, (3) their efforts to meet the QIAS parent involvement requirements and (4) the goals of parent involvement.

- Semi-structured, audio-taped focus group discussions with staff from three QIAS-accredited childcare centers in Victoria, Australia. These discussions used open-ended questions and a 'hypothetical' to investigate three broad aspects of staff's beliefs and practices concerning parent involvement: their communication practices, their communication channels and their experiences.
- Telephone interviews after the focus group discussions to allow individual participants to comment on whether, how and to what extent the issues arising in those discussions echoed their own views and practices.

Participants.

To date, three centres in Victoria, Australia have participated in the study. Each represents a particular set of social relationships between parents and staff:

- Centre 1 is a rural, community-based service. Parents are primarily Anglo-Australian. 5 of the centre staff agreed to participate in the study. All were Anglo-Australian and each had a formal early childhood qualification.

- Centre 2 is a metropolitan service on a university campus. Parents are from a range of cultural and class backgrounds. 7 of the centre staff agreed to participate in the study. 4 were Anglo-Australian and each had a formal early childhood qualification; the other 3 were from non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds and had no formal early childhood qualification.

- Centre 3 is an inner urban, community-based service. Parents are primarily from an Anglo-Australian, middle class background. 3 of the centre staff agreed to participate in the study. All were Anglo-Australian and each had a formal early childhood qualification.

In summary, the 15 staff who have participated in the study to date were:

Table 1: Participants in the study

Formal training - 12		No formal training - 3	
Anglo-Australian: 11	Non-Anglo Australian: 1	Anglo-Australian: 1	Non-Anglo Australian: 2

Data analysis.

Today's paper draws primarily the transcriptions of the three audio-taped focus group discussions. We used a two-stage discourse analysis to analyze those transcripts:

- Stage 1 detailed the manifest content of the discussion about staffs' understandings and practices of parent involvement, using categories that emerged from the data.

- Stage 2 detailed the latent content of those discussions, i.e. the themes and topics underlying staffs' understandings and practices of parent involvement. This generated four interpretive case studies, each highlighting key communication strategies that staff associated with 'good' parent involvement practices.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS.

The two-stage analysis created two types of understanding: stage one elicited the broad themes running through the discussions; the case studies generated in stage two showed how these themes were played-out in particular parent involvement strategies.

Broad themes in staff <u>practices</u> of parent involvement

Stage 1 ("manifest") analysis generated two themes concerning how staff currently <u>practice</u> parent involvement. These themes were common to the three centres:

- All groups of staff used both formal and informal communication to involve parents in planning and delivering their services, but differed in the balance between formal and informal channels. The most commonly used formal channels were parent conferences, parent meetings and message books; the most commonly used informal channels were conversations before and after sessions.

- All groups used both verbal and written communication, but differed in the extent to which they used each form of communication.

Broad themes in staff <u>understandings</u> of parent involvement

Stage 1 ("manifest") analysis generated four themes concerning how staff currently <u>understand</u> parent involvement. These four major themes were intimately bound with each other and were common to the three centres:

- Parent involvement is problematic and complex

- Parent involvement is essential to working effectively with young children

- Informal, verbal channels of communication are the key to creating and maintaining parent involvement in their services

- The QIAS emphasis on formal and written channels of communication distracts staff from involving parents, rather than encouraging them. Several staff regarded the QIAS expectations as superficial and irrelevant to the practicalities of building meaningful communication with parents and - hence - accountability to them

Our stage two analysis highlighted a link between staffs' desire for informal communication with parents and their sense that parent involvement was highly complex and problematic yet essential. It became apparent to us that staff understandings of parent involvement could be likened to what Fish (1979) called building 'interpretive communities'. An interpretive community is a community based on shared understandings. We believe that the staff in the focus groups were attempting to develop a sense of parental involvment that rested on building a shared set of meanings and understandings about who the child is and how s/he should be treated. In Fish's terms they were attempting to build an interpretive community centred on particular understandings of the child. We came to this view on the basis of the four interpretive case studies generated by the stage two analysis:

Case studies: staff constructions of good parent involvement
<u>Case Study 1</u>: "Disclosing the personal."
In each group, some staff said that parent involvement worked meant parents disclosing personal information about family life to them. For example:

> <u>2 - 8</u>: I think this year ... lots of parents are really open and willing to talk in detail, they're comfortable enough to come in and sit down and chat about the children, and I find that ... it helps me and my job and, yeah, makes life easier if I have an understanding of what's going on at home with the children, and can help the children during the day with me ...

The many staff who shared 8's views felt that they could not really understand a child without parents disclosing personal information. However, as staff in Centre 1 explained, eliciting personal information about the child from parents can be ethically problematic:

> <u>1 - 1</u>: And (p5): I guess it's a bit of a trust thing too, where we're trusting them and they're trusting us as well, so that may be part of the building up of a relationship with us all too, just forming that element of trust too. The parents are writing very personal understandings and beliefs about who they are as well, and so I think there is a respect element of, you know, privacy too ... . And I guess by introducing it in terms of it's an ownership for them and it's an ownership for us and an ownership for their children they take on board that it is ownership and that's where it stops I guess. So, you know, they can share what they want to share.

Emergent questions about equitable communication
- Personal information about a family might help staff to work more effectively with a child, but do they have a right to it?
- Can staff build a strong sense of children's identities without it?
- Can staff and parents build shared meanings about children's best interests without parents 'getting personal'?
- Can you build <u>any</u> meaningful relationships without sharing personal understandings and beliefs?
- Do parents withhold personal information from staff because they believe that staff can understand their child sufficiently without it?
- Do parents necessarily share staffs' beliefs on what they need to know about a child?

<u>Case Study 2</u>: "Understanding the professional."
Some staff believed that good parent involvement was based on parents understanding and respecting the professional's knowledge of the child. They felt that for their work with the child to be effective, parents should understand (automatically or after being told by staff) why staff acted as they did with children. Specifically, staff wanted parents to understand that staff decisions were based on their formal, professional knowledge about children.

> 2 – 11: (p3): (Y)ou need to get across to the parents that what we do with the kids is based on observations and you know, it's not just we're playing with them everyday. ... Jenny had a group of parents that we did a round-table discussion with and there had been a few concerns and it was really interesting to see the light dawning on their faces that, "Oh my God, they are doing things that are based on, you know, relevant observation.". ... (O)nce, you know, they were explained to what the aims and objectives were and why things were happening as they were, it was good ...
>
> 2 – 8: (p4): (E)very now and then they will say , "Oh well, you know, what have you been doing?", but we ... also put that on our newsletters, like what the program is about and stuff ...

However, as G. explained, 'putting it in writing' doesn't guarantee shared understanding:

> I don't think something written is ever effective, as effective as actually communicating verbally with parents. People can interpret something that is written, at least every one of us could read the same thing and get something totally different out of it. I think you really need to talk it out to be clear about it.

Several staff in group 2 talked at length about the complexities of creating shared understandings with parents about their children. These staff were uncertain about how parents 'read' what they did, and wanted them to understand that their actions had a professional basis. Staff desires for parents to read situations in the ways that staff did was tinged with uncertainty about how possible this was. Would parents would see their explanations as plausible or as excuses for poor practice? These uncertainties were apparent in the following exchange between staff in centre 2:

> 2 – 8: (p7): I think sometimes we kind of, we feel self-conscious in the presence of parents for too long so we can give the impression that we don't want them around, even though we know we ought to want them around, and sometimes we actually kind of enjoy having them around. ... There should be nothing to hide, but you would just be ... very self-conscious and I don't think you'd do your job as well as you normally ... Isn't it not partly that we're ... not confident the parents will read the situation like we do? ... (I)f they're reading into crying (that) he might be just spitting the dummy and they do that five times a day and we know that they need to actually get it out, but the parent in there might think, "Oh my goodness, they're just leaving him there to cry!" ...
>
> 2 - 9: Yeah, that's when I find it hard, when parents are hanging around...
>
> 2 - 10: You then have to explain why you are doing everything.
>
> 2 - 8: Yeah, I usually do, if they're there I usually will say, "Oh, if he does that, that's the thing he does" ... (W)hile you're there you just

explain to them, because they do look uncomfortable and or they'll go over to them and [pause] it does happen. I mean, I know that's my first reaction when parents come in and it feels almost guilty to be kept hearing explaining why you are doing something, but it's about...

2 - 9: It makes sense to them though if you explain to them. [pause] Sometimes.

Emergent questions about equitable communication
- Professional knowledge might help parents understand why staff do what they do, but can staff ever guarantee that parents see things their way?
- Can staff work effectively if parents don't understand why they act as they do with the children?
- Can staff guarantee that parents will understand their explanations of their actions?
- Will parents' discomfort about staff practices disappear merely because staff tell them those practices have sound professional foundations?

Case Study 3: "Revealing ignorance".
Staff in Centre 1 defined 'good communication' with parents as communication that allowed parents voices to be heard. Staff in this centre believed that they could build an understanding of the child with parents by admitting their ignorance as much as their expertise. They believed that there is value in staff and parents exchanging not just their knowledge about children but also their uncertainties. Here's how one staff member explained the value of staff revealing ignorance:

> 1: And (p12): I guess by letting parents know that you are not sure about everything that there is about their culture, well we've learnt more into their culture and we have learnt more of her values and her understandings, and she has learnt that we are prepared to also get in there and take an interest in what they do.

Another staff member in the group explained how this process allowed parents' voices to be heard:

> 1 – 4: (p20): (W)hen we open up spaces for parents to really have an input ... helps me be a better early childhood professional or a better person, because it makes me question my practices and question ... the way I operate.... And I think that that helps the program of the service grow because it creates more equitable spaces for people and the fringe-dwellers are the people that are silenced, seem to get a bit more of a voice, sometimes. ... I can't speak for the parents, but I think that some parents, they see that they can trust the service more because their ideas and beliefs and understandings are seen as valid, and important. (T)hey're not ... (seen as) ... over-reacting with things or insecure about something, or don't have the appropriate

knowledge. I think some of the parents are starting to feel like, what they have to say is important.

Opening up those spaces had its costs. Admitting their ignorance meant relinquishing their expert status as professionals who always know what's best for parents and for their children. As 1 - 4 explained:

> 1 – 4: (p20): I think parents seem to be more comfortable that we are going to talk about what we see as being true, and tackle issues that may or may not be difficult to talk about. Like at the moment in our room there is a lot of aggression happening, and from that I think parents are also not seeing us as all professionals who know it all, who they've got to compete with. I think they're opening up and feeling more comfortable about saying well, "We don't know what to do with it". And ... (I feel) ... more comfortable saying "Well, I really don't know what the answer is", you know, and "Have you got any strategies?" ... I think it makes for a more honest relationship. ... It's also problematic ... (because if we) ... really take on board what they (parents) say, it means that we're not always going to be right. ... (I)f we really are talking about parents really having a true voice then it means that we have to start sharing some power and start questioning our own practice and our own identity.

Staff also experienced dilemmas about creating dialogue with parents. If parents' voices were to be heard and valued, staff needed to be clear about what they would do if they disagreed with parents about a key issue. A lengthy discussion about this concluded thus:

> There is no answer. There are many possibilities.
> I think though that there's got to be a bottom line at some stage.
> Yes.
> But you take it, this is my summary, there'll be a bottom line at some stage, but you take everyone's ideas on board, try and understand where the parents are coming from with their beliefs and what, with them on that. I'd imagine you try not to force the issue, but if you had to then there would be a stand made.
> I think there'd be on-gong discussions about it, even once the policy was set, that there'd be on-going dialogue with families to discuss it further.

For this staff group, building understandings about the child meant finding new ways of working that encouraged parents to feel that their views were valued. It also meant uncertainty, constant dilemmas about how to resolve differences of approach between staff and parents and - especially it meant relinquishing their expert status.

Emergent questions about equitable communication
• If staff reveal their ignorance and encourage parents' voices to be heard, does this guarantee shared understandings?

- Indeed, are shared understandings of the child possible?
- What do staff do if they can't find some shared understandings of who the child is and what is in their best interests?

Case Study 4: "Joining in – the benefits and costs."
The staff from Centre 3 strongly believed that parent involvement is very beneficial for children, staff and parents. Their views echoed those of staff from Centre 1. In each group, staff believed that 'good' parent involvement meant parents offering resources (from cultural resources through technical resources to time) to the centre. Staff in centre 3 clearly regarded parents joining in as a sign of good staff-parent relationships based on shared understandings:

> 3 - 14: It's (parents joining in) a wonderful support to staff.
> 3 - 13: It makes your job so much easier.
> 3 - 14: Well, it makes you feel good. They care enough to come in and be involved, and supportive. A lot of parents will do things, take things away, like, we put a sign up, you know, we need some new dolls clothes, or dress-ups or something, and "Oh, I can sew. What would you like?" And they get really affirmed by the fact that we're thrilled, and the children are using them, and we love it, because it's something that we just don't have time to do ourselves. Most of the time.
> 3 - 14: You know I think that's very, I think it's good for the parents to be involved in the centre because the word of mouth. Parents talk with other parents, we've often had children come to the centre and they will say, "Oh, do you remember so-and-so, they talked about their child's experience, their child loved being here, their child loved working." And that's come from word of mouth, and if they're not able to see what goes on then they can't actually convey that to other people.
> 3 - 13: An extra pair of hands in the room.

However, within moments 3 - 13 and 3 - 14 expressed their frustration at what can happen when parents join in - their 'extra pair of hands' can challenge how staff are working and explode the sense of a shared understanding about what can and should be done with the young child. For example, 3 - 14 explained that when parents join in, there is always a possibility that they will discipline children inappropriately:

> 3 - 14: (O)ne of the problems I've had is parents coming in who have very strong personal philosophies about a particular issue. And when they're involved in the program with the children, a child may swear, a child may hit another child over the head with a block, parents react very differently. ... If child hits another child over the head with a block we would step in and say, "That's a block. What do you use that for? To build with. That's right. Look at so and so. That really hurt. You need to build with the blocks." The parent will say, "Don't you hit him on the head with that. That's naughty." [laughter]

The staff then discussed other times when parents who joined in had been problematic. Parents had reacted strongly to events that they didn't like and emotions had run high. They concluded their discussion in this way:

> 3 - 14: It is better not to encourage, sometimes, some parents.
> 3 - 15: Yes.
> 3 - 14: That doesn't mean the opportunity is not there and if they avail themselves of it we won't support it wholeheartedly, but it might be that there are some parents that we would be overly, I wouldn't be assaulting them, assaulting's not the right word there. [laughter] ... I wouldn't be encouraging them ... as strongly as I would some other parents ...
> 3 - 15: Yes.
> 3 - 14: ... who I can see we have a beautiful gift to share with the children.
> 3 - 15: That about covers it.

3 – 14 and 3 - 15 were not the only staff to reflect on the fact that they accepted parent involvement if it posed no threat to their practices and self-image as a professional. The remarks of one staff-member from centre 1 were especially perceptive:

> 1: 5 (p3): (W)e've been trying to reflect on how we communicate with parents and some of the questions that we have been looking at as a group have been ... how we position parents and how our relationships with parents may reflect our relationships with children; and why we communicate in particular ways with some parents and not communicate with parents in other ways. (L)ast year or the year before ... we thought that we communicated quite well with parents and worked on a collaborative approach with parents, but in fact we very much normalize parents. ... (W)e collaborate if they fit within our framework, and when they step out of that it becomes really difficult. I think one of the issues about communicating with parents is ... trying to open up other spaces to give parents a voice that they might not have had, and also a way for us to reflect on how we, at times, interpret what parents say, or hear what we want to hear from what parents say.

Creating parent involvement by encouraging parents to 'join in' had benefits and costs. The benefits included extra resources for the children, an extra pair of hands, a possible advocate for the program with other parents and a sense that the parents cared what staff did. The costs were associated with parents who discipline children inappropriately and parents who were 'difficult' because their views differed to those of the staff or because they were extremely emotional with the staff. These costs highlighted the difficulties facing parents and staff who attempted to create a shared understanding of the child.

Emergent questions about equitable communication
- Can parents join in on equal terms with staff when their child management philosophies differ from those of the staff?
- How can and should staff respond to parents actions in the classroom that they believe to be inappropriate?

4. IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS.

Participants in this study were consistently ambivalent about involving parents in their program. They dutifully expressed the prevailing belief that parent involvement was a good thing for parents, staff and children, but they knew that is was neither easy nor guaranteed because developing a shared understanding with parents about what was in the best interests of their child was neither easy nor guaranteed.

QIAS has specified that centres must operate formal means of parent-staff communication in order to make them more accountable. Formal communication - especially in written form - is more easily assessed than the informal, verbal communication which, as we found, staff prefer. In our view staff prefer informal, verbal communication because it allows them to try to negotiate shared meanings with parents about who a child is and her/his best interests. It allows them to try to create an 'interpretive community' with parents (Fish, 1979). Participants in this study were clear that formal means of communicating with parents, as required in QIAS, were no guarantee of shared understandings. From this perspective, it is no surprise that many staff dismissed the QIAS requirements in this area as irrelevant to 'the real business' of involving parents.

In our view, staff's dismissal of the QIAS requirements in this area reveals the distance between the QIAS requirements concerning parent involvement and the politics of knowledge that underpin present staff-parent relationships. The 'politics of knowledge' refers to the competition between social groups to privilege their knowledge as the truth and to get that privilege accepted by others. These politics – the competition between knowledges for the status of truth - were evidenced in our case studies in staff struggles to privilege:
- their professional need to know against parents' right for privacy (Case study 1)
- their professional knowledge against parents' knowledge (Case study 2)
- their professional voices against parents' voices (Case study 3)
- their professional practices against parents' practices (Case study 4).

In each of these instances, staff had to negotiate their way through a difficult set of questions about whose knowledge of the child should be privileged and why. So, as they tried to build an interpretive community with parents, they had to negotiate their way through a set of knowledge-power relations that centred on the following questions:
- Should parents have to disclose personal information 'in the interests of the child' and should staff expect it? Who benefits from this disclosure? Is such

disclosure equitable communication exchange that helps to build shared meanings of the child? (Case study 1)

- Should staff who explain professional knowledge and practices to parents assume that they will accept them? Who benefits from parents' acceptance and does it qualify as an equitable communication exchange that helps to build shared meanings of the child? (Case study 2)
- Is it appropriate for staff – as professionals – to reveal ignorance and share uncertainties and does it give voice to parents? Who benefits from this admission of uncertainty and is it an equitable communication exchange that helps to build shared meanings of the child? (Case study 3)
- Is parental joining in appropriate only when parents act in accordance with the centre's philosophy? Who benefits from selective permission for parents to join in and is this an equitable communication exchange that helps to build shared meanings of the child? (Case study 4)

These questions not only express the knowledge-power relations in which staff were engaged as they tried to involve parents in their programs, but they also express a broader set of knowledge-power politics in early childhood education. Early childhood education as an institution attempts to privilege professional knowledge over parental knowledge. For instance, in much early childhood literature concerning parent involvement, parental knowledge is presented as inadequate, misguided or just plain wrong! (MacNaughton & Hughes, 1999b). On the other hand, professional knowledge of the child claims the status of truth and therefore its right to be privileged over parental knowledge because it is 'developmental' (scientific), objective, norm-referenced and applicable to all children. In contrast, parental knowledge of the child is problematic because it is anecdotal, subjective, ad hoc, individualized and applicable only to specific children.

Given these wider knowledge-power relations, parent involvement in specific centres will always be problematic. It requires staff to give credence to parents' non-professional, non-scientific, subjective, personal and emotional understandings of the child, posing a direct challenge to their status as professionals and experts. Consequently, substantive parental involvement in a centre's program (as distinct from more peripheral involvement through, say, 'working bees' and fund-raising) implies acknowledging that parents not only have valuable knowledge of the child but that their knowledge should be privileged over staff knowledge.

Our research results, while preliminary and provisional, indicate that externally imposed formal means and channels of communication tend to create parental involvement that is formalized to the point of being ritualized. Substantive parent involvement is more likely to emerge from recognising the knowledge-power relations that are embedded in staff-parent communication and searching for ways to manage those relations that give parents a real voice without posing a threat to staff identity as professionals. Staff identified some keys to doing this when they listed the challenges they see in parent involvement. Their list included:

- Creating the time needed for meaningful face-to-face communication
- Negotiating differences between parents and staff about appropriate child behaviour
- Discovering methods of communication that 'worked' both for parents and staff.

Perhaps the quality of parent involvement at a centre should be assessed according to the centre's efforts to do these three things, rather than via the existence (or not) of formal written documents and meetings. The latter may or may not enable the knowledge-power relations of building an interpretive community about who the child is and what is in the child's best interests. However, they offer more chance of establishing equitable communication with parents in which staff and parents contribute to meaning-making about the child than do the current QIAS requirements.

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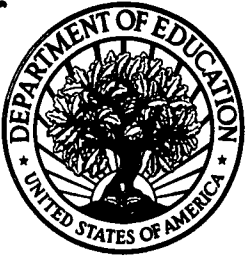
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Organization/Address: (1) The University of Melbourne	Telephone: 61 39344 0985	FAX: 61 39344 0995
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