

Why relationships matter: parent and early childhood teacher perspectives about the provisions afforded by young children's relationships

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This study investigated the perspectives of early childhood teachers and parents regarding the importance of provisions afforded by child–teacher and peer relationships in early childhood centres. Participants were 200 parents and 71 teachers of children aged 0–5 years who responded to an online survey containing a series of relationship function statements that were rated according to their perceived importance. Results demonstrate that most functions were rated as more important in the context of child–teacher relationships than peer relationships, although statements reflecting the provision of friendship were regarded as more important in the domain of peer relationships. Ratings for particular provisions of infant relationships were significantly lower than those for older children; a result generated largely by variation in the ratings of teachers in comparison to those of parents. Findings are discussed in relation to differences between parent and teacher perspectives and implications for the development of inclusive, relationship-based pedagogies.

Keywords: relationships; teacher perspectives; parent perspectives; early childhood education

Introduction

Contemporary approaches to early childhood education frequently centre around a commitment to fostering young children's interpersonal relationships on the basis that the quality of these relationships contributes to healthy growth, development and psychological well-being. It is argued that through positive relationships, children acquire many of the dispositions and attitudes that underpin successful learning (Bartel 2005; Dunn 1993; Honig 2002; Rose and Asher 2000). Due in part to these powerful claims, the early childhood literature often espouses the importance of positive relationships between young children and significant others (Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck 2003; Joseph and Strain 2004; Paptheodorou and Moyles 2009; Wittmer and Petersen 2005).

Relationships are constructed over time as two or more individuals experience one another through reciprocal social exchanges (Hinde 1979). These social interactions afford a range of provisions, or benefits for the child, depending on

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the priorities and expectations of the people with whom the child is interacting (Weiss 1974). Relationships, therefore, are imbued with the values and expectations of the person or people with whom the child shares this experiential relationship context (Dunn 1993; Hinde and Stephenson-Hinde 1987; Lewis 2005).

In this article, we report a study of the perspectives of parents and teachers of children aged 0–5 years in terms of the provisions that might be realised through the relationships that children experience in early childhood centres. By understanding teachers' perspectives, it is possible to gain an insight into the perspectives that drive pedagogical decision-making, while parents' perspectives provide a broader understanding of the family values and priorities that children bring with them into the early childhood centre. Explorations of parent and teacher perspectives thus provide a deeper understanding of the social-contextual foundation of the kinds of relationships that children form in their centres as well as the role that these relationships can play in their lives. A further impetus to appreciate parent and teacher perspectives comes from calls for early childhood centres to consider multiple perspectives when implementing their programmes (Buysse and Wesley 2006; Moss 2007). Such data can support parent–teacher dialogue and relationship-building by providing insights into their respective values and priorities regarding the kinds of relationships to be fostered in early childhood settings.

The provisions of young children's relationships

The conceptual framework for this study draws on a functional approach to the study of relationships. Weiss (1974) proposed that all individuals have a range of social needs that can be fulfilled through their relationships with others, including the development of attachment, enhancement of worth, and provision of companionship, guidance and nurturance. Lewis (2005) claims that relationships also satisfy cognitive needs through supporting opportunities to teach and learn. His inclusion of pedagogical relationship provisions is particularly relevant to conceptualisations of children's relationships within educational contexts where principles of care, well-being and learning are all promoted (Degotardi and Pearson 2009).

Young children live in a network of relationships and each particular relationship will have its own characteristics depending upon the provisions that it affords (Lewis 2005; Shpancer 2002). One benefit of the functional approach is that it permits researchers to explore similarities and differences in the qualities of different relationships within this network (Lewis 2005). While one relationship may fulfil many of the child's needs, different individuals assume different roles and positions and are therefore motivated to engage in different types of interactions and activities with the child. Accordingly, the extent to which any two relationships meet particular functions will vary.

Within early childhood centres, children are directly involved in two types of relationships – the child–teacher relationship and peer relationship – and these different relationships serve distinct, overlapping or complementary functions for the child. To begin with, child–teacher relationships provide children with emotional security, protection, nurturance and care (Hendrick 2004). While this caregiving provision is often associated with child–teacher relationships, studies also note how children care for, assist, protect and provide emotional support to their peers (Niffenegger and Willer 1998; Rayna 2001; Rose and Asher 2000; Sebanc et al. 2007). In addition, children's relationships with both teachers and peers provide an

important source of self-acknowledgement and validation (Corsaro 1994; Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2009).

Children's relationships also function to socialise children to the expectations and conventions of the wider group. For example, teachers might use social reinforcements and prompts to guide children towards appropriate social behaviours. In the belief that their teachers will reinforce social conventions, children might draw their teachers' attention to convention breaches by peers. Similarly, peers have clear expectations in regard to one another's behaviours and will seek to reinforce these expectations through their interactions with each other (Corsaro 1994; Fabes, Hanish and Martin 2003; Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009; Sebanc et al. 2007). The pedagogical functions of children's relationships include the teaching and learning of new skills and knowledge. Teachers undertake explicit strategies to introduce and foster new competencies and understandings during their interactions with children (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2009) and, through reciprocal communication, children and adults work together to construct knowledge (Curtis and Carter 2008; Siraj-Blatchford 2004). Peers also coach one another in the acquisition of new skills and co-constructing new understandings during the course of their peer interactions (Noller et al. 2001).

Finally, relationships are a major source of friendship and group affiliation. Most frequently discussed within the context of peer relationships, friendships have elements of stability and endurance, and can extend to social events such as 'play dates' and social events that occur outside of the classroom (Niffenegger and Willer 1998). Children's friendships are a source of companionship, provide a sense of belonging (Noller et al. 2001) and opportunities to engage in collective, communal activities during which they express, negotiate and share ideas and points of view (Corsaro 1994). Although children tend to prefer peers as playmates, they also actively involve teachers in their play and playful interactions (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2009).

Variation in relationship perspectives

Given the range of provisions that are afforded by children's relationships, Takahashi (2005) argues that it is essential to pay close attention to the idiosyncratic ways in which functions are associated with particular relationships. Furman and Buhrmester (1985), for example, report that 11- to 13-year-old children recognised that the extent to which provisions were met varied according to the relationship under investigation. These children associated the provisions of affection, assistance and enhancement of worth with parents, whereas peers were associated most highly with companionship.

Little is known, however, about the extent to which parents and teachers associate different provisions with different relationships, particularly in early childhood education settings. The overarching aim of the present study is therefore to investigate whether differences exist in regard to parents' and teachers' perspectives on child-teacher and peer relationships, in terms of both the nature of and importance attached to the provisions offered by these two relationship types.

Specifically, because both child-teacher and peer relationships have the potential to satisfy a range of social and cognitive needs, we first compared the extent to which parents and teachers attached importance to particular functions within these two relationship contexts. Variations may be apparent also in parents' and teachers' conceptualisations of the different types of relationships that children are establishing.

Thompson (2005) explains that such conceptualisations should not only acknowledge the presence of multiple functions, but also consider the ways that these functions interact and overlap with one another. For example, emotional support, protection and assistance have been variously associated with nurturance and caregiving within the child–teacher relationship (Harrison 2003; Honig 2002) and friendship in the context of peer relationships (Rayna 2001; Sebanc et al. 2007). This suggests that the meaning that is attributed to different relationship provisions may depend on the relationship in which they occur (Thompson 2005). Our second aim is therefore to describe perceived functions offered by the two relationship types.

The third aim of the study is to compare the perspectives of parents and teachers, in terms of importance each cohort attached to the various functions offered by the two relationship types. The handful of studies that have explored parent and teacher perspectives about children's relationships in early childhood centres indicate the presence of some commonalities. Drugli and Undheim's (2012) report that both parents and teachers of infants cited closeness, warmth, and security as characteristics of positive relationships (see also Ebbeck and Yim 2009; Harrist, Thompson and Norris 2007). However, Drugli and Undheim describe that teachers, more than parents, stressed the importance of responding to individual child needs and initiatives, suggesting an acknowledgement of the pedagogical function of their relationships with children. With older children, this teaching and learning provision features more strongly in both teachers' and parents' perspectives. Lane, Stanton-Chapman, Jamison, and Phillips (2007) asked parents and teachers of 2- to 6-year-old children to rate the relative importance of children's co-operation (e.g., compliance with classroom expectations and activities), assertion (e.g., initiative, confidence and social approachability) and self-control (e.g., controlling temper, co-operation and sharing, appropriate conflict resolution). Parents and teachers attributed similar values to the importance of child co-operation in adult-child relationships, but parents were higher than teachers in their ratings of assertion and self-control. The results suggest that parents value child agency and contribution more than teachers but only within boundaries of socially acceptable adult and peer-directed behaviours.

Our final aim is to determine whether children's age is a source of variation. It is possible that parents and teachers may attribute varying importance to one relationship context over another, depending on the age of the focus child (Takahashi 2005). Also, as children get older, adult expectations about children's behaviour and learning change, and therefore may lead to qualitative shifts in the functions that they wish to see promoted by children's relationship-based encounters with others (Lewis 2005). It would therefore be reasonable to hypothesise that perspectives about children's relationships would vary according to the age of the children in question.

Methods

Data generation

Data for this study were generated by means of online questionnaires developed to measure the importance attributed by parents and teachers to a range of provisions associated with young children's relationships. Two questionnaires were developed; one for parents and one for teachers (note that in this article, we use the word 'teacher' to refer to any staff member working directly in the care of education of young children). Each questionnaire included two series of 19 statements that

reflected a diversity of functions that can be met via children's relationships with others in their early childhood centre. Derived from the relationship literature, these statements were associated with the functions of receiving care (including having physical and health needs met, receiving protection, developing emotional security), individual acknowledgement and validation (including being regarded as important, being able to express one's opinions, being listened to), socialisation (including following instructions, listening to others, learning social skills and behaviours), learning and teaching (including learning new skills and knowledge, helping and co-operating with one another) and affiliation and belonging (including having friends and playmates, staying in touch and socialising away from the centre, relating to diverse others). While these functional categories informed the inclusion of each individual statement, it was understood that individual functions statements could correspond with more than one of the broad categories. For example, the statement regarding 'being able to express his/her opinions' may relate to *individual acknowledgement and validation* as well as to *affiliation and belonging*, while 'helping and co-operating' may relate to both *learning and teaching* as well as *socialisation*.

The first series of 19 statements were situated in the context of the child-teacher relationship, while the second series contained the same relationship functions but the statements were adapted to suit the context of the peer relationship. Table 1 provides two illustrations of how statements were expressed and adapted to suit (1) the relationship type (child-teacher vs. peer) and (2) the cohort (parent vs. teacher survey). Respondents were requested to rate the importance of each relationship function statement on 7-point scale, from 'very strongly disagree' to 'very strongly agree'. Within each relationship type, the online survey tool automatically generated a random order for the 19 statements.

Recruitment and respondents

Invitations to complete the questionnaire were mailed to approximately 200 early childhood centres across the Sydney metropolitan and surrounding semi-rural areas. Centre names and addresses were derived from a database held by Macquarie University for early childhood practicum placement. These centres are all accredited

Table 1. Examples of the adaption of relationship function statements to suit the two survey cohorts across the two relationship types.

Cohort	Relationship type	
	Child-adult relationship	Peer relationship
Parent	It is important for my child to learn social rules and appropriate social behaviours from his/her teacher	It is important for my child to learn social rules and appropriate social behaviours from his/her classmates
Teacher	It is important for me to teach social rules and appropriate social behaviour to children of this age	It is important for children of this age to learn about social rules and appropriate social behaviour from their classmates
Parent	It is important for my child's teacher to protect and comfort my child when he/she needs this	It is important for my child to be protected and comforted by other children when he/she needs this
Teacher	It is important for me to protect and comfort these children when they need this	It is important for these children to protect and comfort each other when this is needed

centres, meaning that they have attained a satisfactory assessment of quality as required by national early childhood quality standards. Centres were asked to distribute invitation flyers to both parents and teachers with information about the study including the survey URL. The first page of the online questionnaire contained information about the ethical aspects of the research, including confidentiality, publication of results and the contact names and affiliations of the researchers. Respondents were able to continue to the next page of the questionnaire once they had indicated informed consent to participate.

There were 271 responses, comprising 200 parent and 71 teacher responses. Analysis of provided post-codes showed that responses were drawn from 107 distinct suburb areas (parent responses = 89 areas; teacher responses = 36 areas), with the most frequently provided post-code representing only 5.7% of the data. This suggests that respondents were spread across the wide metropolitan and surrounding areas and thus minimised the likelihood of any effects of responses being nested within geographical location. Approximately 65% nominated Australian or 'Anglo' as their cultural background, and 90% nominated English as the language spoken at home. Other respondents nominated over 20 different cultural backgrounds and 10 different languages, suggesting that at least some degree of cultural diversity was represented in the total survey responses.

Parents were asked to provide the age of their child or, if they had more than one child in the centre, to complete the questionnaire with a specific child in mind. Teachers were asked to nominate the age group with whom they predominantly worked or (for those who worked across age groups) on whom they would like to focus when completing the survey. For analysis, the parent- and teacher-reported child-age data were collapsed into three groups: Under 24 months (infants); 24–35 months (toddlers) and over 3 years (preschoolers). Parents and teachers were also asked to nominate their gender and their highest level of education. Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics for these measures.

Analysis strategy

We adopted a two-stage approach in our analysis. In the first stage, we used a series of *t*-tests to compare the mean ratings, pooled across both cohorts, of corresponding

Table 2. Child age group, gender and qualification level (and percentages) reported by parent and teacher respondents.

Demographic	Parents (<i>n</i> = 200)	Teachers (<i>n</i> = 71)
<i>Age group of child</i>		
Infants (0–2 years)	19 (9.5)	14 (19.7)
Toddlers (2 years)	37 (18.5)	9 (12.6)
Preschooler (3–5 years)	144 (72.0)	48 (67.7)
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	179 (89.9)	64 (95.5)
Male	20 (10.1)	3 (4.5)
<i>Qualification</i>		
No university degree	56 (28.0)	22 (32.8)
University degree	144 (72.0)	45 (67.2)

Note: Not all participants elected to answer questions relating to their gender or qualification.

relationship function statements across the two relationship contexts. In the second stage, we used principal component analysis (PCA) to form qualitative groupings of the perceived functions for each relationship type. PCA allowed us to reduce the full set of individual questions to a smaller number of components by establishing which individual items grouped together. These components were then used as dependent variables in a series of ANOVAs investigating whether the level of priority attributed to these components varied according to cohort (parent vs. teacher) and the age of the child (infants, toddlers, preschoolers). Where results were significant, exploratory interactions were calculated in order to further investigate the patterns of the cohort and/or age-related trends.

Results

Preliminary analysis

Preliminary analyses compared mean scores and scores on the principal components by respondent qualification. No significant effects on any variables were found, so qualification was excluded from results reported here (full analyses including qualification available from authors on request). The small proportion of male respondents, particularly in the teacher cohort, prevented the analysis of the effect of gender.

Comparison of responses to each relationships function statement across the two relationship types

Table 3 presents the comparison of the mean ratings for each relationship function statement in the contexts of child–teacher and peer relationships. The majority of statements were rated significantly higher in the context of the child–teacher relationship compared with the peer relationship. Exceptions were statements related to the provision of friendship, playmate, enduring contact, opportunities to socialise outside of the centre and learning to relate to diverse others, where statements in the peer relationship rated significantly higher than corresponding ones in the child–teacher relationship. The functions of helping and co-operating, expressing one’s opinion, developing a close bond and being helped to ‘fit in’ were equally attributed to both child–teacher and peer relationships.

PCA of the child–teacher relationship

A PCA retaining components with minimum eigenvalues of one and employing varimax rotation was run on the child–teacher relationship statements. Four components were retained. The statement ‘Learn how to relate to teachers from different social and cultural backgrounds’ failed to load substantially onto any components, and was therefore excluded from the analysis. The PCA was rerun with the remaining 18 statements, and four components were again retained with eigenvalues before rotation of 5.04, 1.95, 1.80 and 1.09. The eigenvalue for the first non-retained component was 0.94. The four-component solution accounted for 54.81% of the variance. Major loadings were considered to be any loadings above 0.4 (Tabachnick and Fidell 2007). See Table 4 for major loadings for each statement onto the retained components and Cronbach’s α for each retained component.

Table 3. Comparison of mean (and standard deviation) ratings for each relationship function statement across the two relationship types.

Relationship function for the child	Child–teacher relationship	Peer relationship	<i>t</i>
Have one's physical and health needs cared for	6.62 (0.69)	6.08 (0.90)	8.26**
Be regarded as special and important	6.36 (1.01)	5.67 (1.30)	9.20**
Feel safe and secure	6.84 (0.52)	6.75 (0.54)	2.59*
Be protected and comforted	6.72 (0.51)	5.83 (1.05)	13.12**
Be encouraged to be self-reliant	6.31 (0.91)	6.18 (0.97)	2.44*
Help and co-operate with one another	6.53 (0.63)	6.46 (0.75)	1.35
Be able to confide	6.38 (0.74)	5.61 (1.05)	12.28**
Develop a close bond	5.86 (1.10)	5.78 (1.09)	1.02
Be good friends	5.49 (1.15)	6.00 (0.91)	−6.64**
Be able to express his/her opinion	6.33 (0.84)	6.37 (0.72)	−0.77
Learn social rules and appropriate behaviour	6.48 (0.83)	5.98 (1.19)	6.77**
Learn new skills and knowledge	6.54 (0.61)	6.05 (0.82)	9.90**
Be playmates	4.89 (1.46)	6.14 (0.88)	−13.01**
Have one's point of view listened to and considered	6.22 (0.79)	5.94 (0.96)	4.36**
To listen to and follow instructions	6.35 (0.98)	5.45 (1.31)	10.28**
Be able to stay in contact when he/she moves on	5.00 (1.31)	5.69 (1.00)	−8.25**
Be able to socialise outside the centre	3.93 (1.44)	5.70 (1.10)	−19.10**
Be helped to fit in at the centre	6.43 (0.78)	6.35 (0.71)	1.39
Learn how to relate to others from different social and cultural backgrounds	6.26 (0.87)	6.56 (0.69)	−5.34**

* $p \leq 0.01$, ** $p < 0.001$.*Component 1: socialisation and learning*

The statements loading on component 1 were related to *socialising and learning*. The strongest loading statements were about listening to and following teacher instructions, learning social rules and appropriate behaviour, helping and co-operating with the teacher and being encouraged to be self-reliant. The learning function is reinforced by the inclusion of 'learning new skills and knowledge from the teacher'. The inclusion of being 'able to confide in the teacher' suggests that respondents associated elements of closeness and trust with teacher-derived socialisation and learning processes.

Component 2: care

The second component clustered statements related to function of receiving physical, emotional and social care from the teacher. Also included was the notion of 'fitting in' at the centre, suggesting that teacher *care* was regarded as an important aspect of the child's feeling of belonging within the centre. As with *socialisation and learning*, 'learning new skills and knowledge' also loaded with *care*, suggesting that respondents associated learning with the meeting of the child's physical, emotional and social needs.

Table 4. Principal component analysis of ratings for child–teacher relationship function statements.

Relationship function	1	2	3	4
<i>1. Socialisation and learning (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$)</i>				
Learn social rules and appropriate behaviour from the teacher	0.783			
To listen to and follow the instructions of the teacher	0.780			
Be encouraged to be self-reliant by the teacher	0.722			
Help and co-operate with the teacher	0.587			0.412
Be able to confide in the teacher	0.469			
Learn new skills and knowledge from the teacher	0.435	0.513		
<i>2. Care (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.69$)</i>				
Feel safe and secure around the teacher		0.795		
Be helped by the teacher to fit in at the centre		0.628		
Be protected and comforted by the teacher		0.612		
Have one's physical and health needs cared for by the teacher		0.593		
<i>3. Friendship (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.73$)</i>				
Be able to socialise with the teacher outside the centre			0.809	
Be playmates with the teacher			0.730	
Be able to stay in contact with the teacher when he/she moves on			0.655	
Be good friends with the teacher			0.648	
Develop a close bond with the teacher			0.432	
<i>4. Validation (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$)</i>				
Have one's point of view listened to and considered by the teacher				0.744
Be regarded as special and important by the teacher				0.637
Be able to express his/her opinion to the teacher				0.627

Component 3: friendship

The loading statements on component 3 related to the notion of *friendship*, including being a good friend, a playmate, developing a bond and developing enduring relationships which cross-contextual and temporal boundaries.

Component 4: validation

Statements in this last component related to the *validation* of child individuality and contribution, including the child being regarded as special and important, being able to express his/her opinion, having this opinion listened to, and being able to help and co-operate with the teacher.

Variation in child–teacher relationship function components

Table 5 shows standardised scores on all four components, by cohort and child age.

Socialisation and learning showed significant main effects of both cohort, $F(1, 244) = 37.18$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.13$, and child age, $F(2, 244) = 36.46$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.23$. A significant cohort by child age interaction illustrated that the greatest difference was during infancy, when teachers attributed less importance to the socialisation and learning component than parents, $F(2, 244) = 24.41$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.17$. Teachers of toddlers and pre-schoolers rated this component higher than teachers of infants, whereas parents' ratings were relatively constant regardless of the age of their child (see Figure 1). *Validation* was rated significantly higher by teachers

Table 5. Mean (and SD) scores on the four child–teacher relationship components for parents and teachers in relation to infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

Cohort	Age group	Component			
		Socialisation and learning	Care	Friendship	Validation
Parent	Infants	−0.05 (0.71)	0.16 (0.56)	0.24 (0.99)	−0.28 (0.65)
	Toddlers	0.13 (0.72)	−0.04 (0.90)	−0.13 (1.21)	−0.22 (1.04)
	Preschoolers	0.21 (0.61)	−0.08 (1.13)	−0.05 (0.91)	−0.30 (0.92)
Teacher	Infants	−2.40 (2.18)	0.27 (1.06)	0.23 (1.09)	0.47 (1.44)
	Toddlers	−0.11 (0.91)	0.30 (0.52)	0.53 (0.69)	0.63 (0.70)
	Preschoolers	0.09 (0.67)	0.07 (0.84)	−0.04 (1.09)	0.85 (0.52)

than parents, $F(1, 244) = 31.33, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.11$, with no significant interaction with child age, $F(2, 244) = .81, p = \text{ns}$. All other effects of child age or cohort were non-significant.

PCA of the peer relationship

A second PCA retaining components with minimum eigenvalues of one and employing varimax rotation was run on the peer relationship statements. Three components were retained. The statement ‘feel safe and secure around his/her peers’

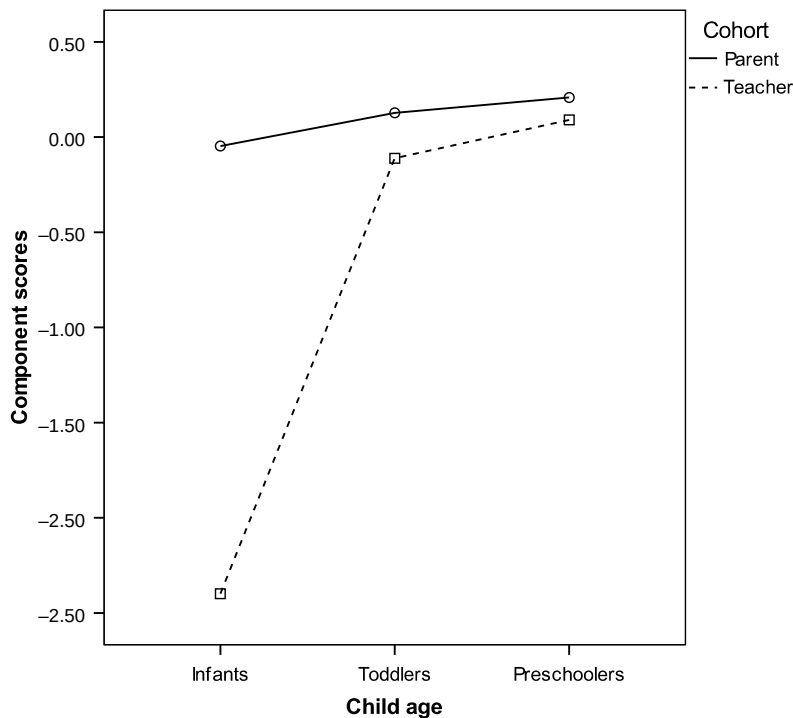


Figure 1. Component scores of parents and teachers for the *socialisation and learning* function of child–teacher relationships across the three age groups.

failed to load substantially on to any component and was therefore excluded from the analysis. The PCA was rerun with the remaining 18 items, and three components were again retained with eigenvalues before rotation of 7.41, 1.73 and 1.24. The eigenvalue for the first non-retained component was 0.89. The three component solution accounted for 57.63% of the variance. See Table 6 for major loadings for each statement onto the retained components and Cronbach's α for each retained component.

Component 1: friendship

As in the child–teacher relationship, statements related to developing a bond, being a friend, playmate and developing relationships across temporal and context boundaries formed a *friendship* component. Statements relating to being protected, helped by, and able to confide in one's peers suggest that elements of care which comprised a separate function in the child–teacher relationship were regarded as integral functions of peer friendships.

Component 2: validation and support

The second component also included care functions, but strong loadings on being 'regarded as special and important', having 'one's point of view listened to and considered' and 'one's physical and health needs cared for' by peers show that care appears to be associated with the *validation and support* of the individual child. The inclusion of items related to learning social rules, appropriate behaviour, new skills and knowledge suggests that, in this relationship type, perspectives about *validation and support* extended to the provision of learning opportunities by peers.

Table 6. Principal component analysis of ratings for peer relationship function statements.

Relationship function for the child	1	2	3
<i>1. Friendship (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$)</i>			
Be able to stay in contact with his/her peers when he/she moves on	0.816		
Be able to socialise with his/her peers outside the centre	0.803		
Develop a close bond with his/her peers	0.671		
Be playmates with his/her peers	0.665		
Be good friends with his/her peers	0.629		0.449
Be able to confide in his/her peers	0.538	0.434	
Be protected and comforted by his/her peers	0.507	0.488	
Be helped by his/her peers to fit in at the centre	0.483		
<i>2. Validation and support (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$)</i>			
Be regarded as special and important by his/her peers		0.814	
Have one's point of view listened to and considered by his/her peers		0.734	
Have one's physical and health needs cared for by his/her peers		0.622	
Learn social rules and appropriate behaviour from his/her peers		0.607	
Learn new skills and knowledge from his/her peers		0.534	
To listen to and follow the wishes of his/her peers		0.520	
<i>3. Agency and contribution (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$)</i>			
Be encouraged to be self-reliant by his/her peers			0.806
Help and co-operate with his/her peers			0.803
Be able to express his/her opinion to his/her peers			0.712
Learn how to relate to children from different social and cultural backgrounds			0.570

Table 7. Mean (and SD) scores on the three peer relationship components for parents and teachers in relation to infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

Cohort	Age group	Component		
		Friendship	Validation and support	Agency and contribution
Parent	Infants	−0.12 (1.03)	−0.21 (0.53)	−0.17 (0.61)
	Toddlers	−0.05 (1.37)	−0.26 (1.02)	0.26 (0.79)
	Preschoolers	0.07 (0.92)	−0.20 (0.99)	0.20 (0.73)
Teacher	Infants	0.22 (1.02)	−0.20 (1.37)	−2.04 (2.60)
	Toddlers	−0.07 (0.92)	0.55 (0.86)	−0.64 (1.15)
	Preschoolers	−0.17 (0.94)	0.87 (0.49)	−0.16 (0.68)

Component 3: agency and contribution

The final component saw a grouping of statements related to social-communicative *agency and contribution*, including being ‘encouraged to be self-reliant’, ‘able to express his/her opinions’ and learning how to ‘relate to children from different social and cultural backgrounds’. The inclusion of ‘help and co-operate with’ and ‘be good friends with’ his/her peers suggests that parents and teachers recognise the contribution of individual agency to friendly, collaborative peer relationships.

Variation in priorities associated with peer relationship components

Table 7 shows standardised scores on all three components, by cohort and child age.

Validation and support showed significant main effects of both cohort [$F(1, 233) = 12.44, p = 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$] and child age [$F(2, 233) = 3.78, p = 0.024, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$]. Figure 2 demonstrates a significant cohort by child age interaction [$F(2, 233) = 3.53, p = 0.03, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$], showing that parents’ ratings of validation and support remained constant and low, whereas teachers’ ratings of older children were higher than their ratings of young children.

In contrast, parents rated the *agency and contribution* component significantly higher than teachers [$F(1, 233) = 36.03, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.13$], with a significant effect of child age [$F(2, 233) = 16.82, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.13$] and a significant cohort by child age interaction [$F(2, 233) = 7.85, p = 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.06$]. In this function, the main area of difference was between parents’ and teachers’ ratings for infants, with teacher ratings of older children again being higher than those of infants (see Figure 3). There were no effects of cohort or child age on the *Friendship* component.

Discussion

In this study, we explored how parents and teachers rated the importance of different provisions that can be afforded by child–teacher and peer relationships that occur within early childhood centres. Our first aim was to explore broad variations in parent and teacher ratings according to relationship type. We found that most provisions were associated more highly with the child–teacher relationship than the peer relationship, illustrating that the both teachers and parents value highly the many social, emotional and pedagogical functions that can be realised through the teacher–child relationship. Not only did these parents’ and teachers’ perceptions reflect Takahashi’s (2005) claim that, at any one point in the lifespan, there is likely

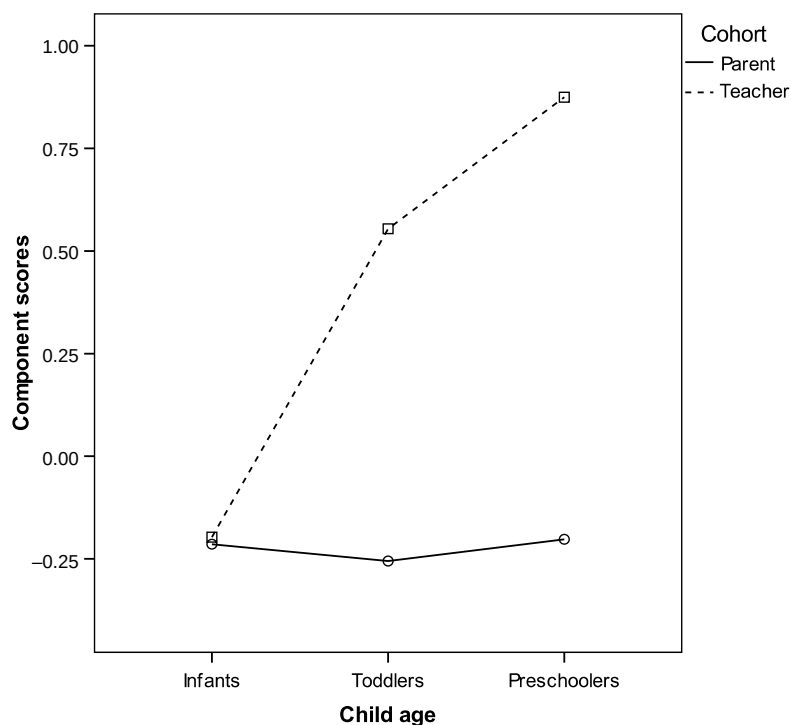


Figure 2. Component scores of parents and teachers for the *validation and support* function of peer relationships across the three age groups.

to be a focal relationship that affords many provisions, but they reaffirm the important and diverse roles that carers, including early childhood teachers, play in the lives of young children (Paptheodorou and Moyles 2009; Thompson 2005). A notable exception to this trend related to statements about friendship, where the child–teacher relationship attracted lower ratings than the peer relationship. This is consistent with Weiss’ (1974) argument that, in any relationship network, certain provisions may be more compatible with one relationship than another. Despite research to suggest that young children actively seek teachers as playmates (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009), our results support literature that suggests that friendship and long-term companionship are perceived as being afforded most strongly by peers (Furman and Buhrmester 1985; Niffenegger and Willer 1998, Noller et al. 2001).

Our analysis also supports and expands on claims related to the varied functions of different relationship types outlined in our literature review, by revealing patterns in parent and teacher conceptualisations of children’s relationships. The perceived different functions of the two relationship types were represented by the clustering of distinct statements. Within the teacher–child relationship, four components emerged, including the pedagogical function of *Socialisation and learning*, the social function of *Friendship* and the social-emotional functions of *Care* and *Validation*, reflecting the multifaceted nature of early childhood teacher professionalism seen in recent discussions of relational pedagogy (Dalli 2008; Papatheodorou 2009).

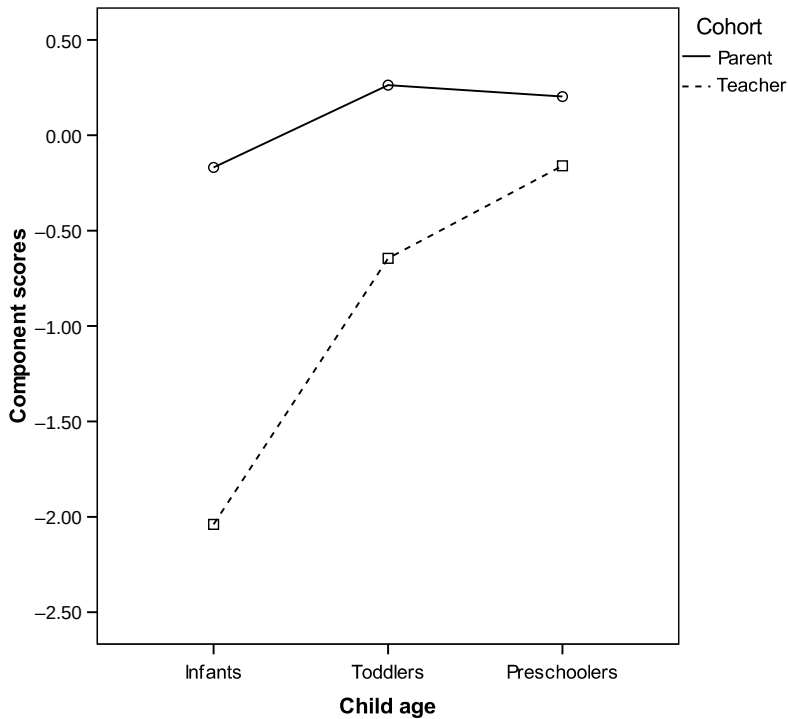


Figure 3. Component scores of parents and teachers for the *agency and contribution* function of peer relationships across the three age groups.

In contrast, the same statements in the context of the peer relationship resulted in only three components, with the statements associated with *Care* in the teacher–child relationship being spread between *Friendship* and *Validation and support*. The perception, among teachers and parents in this study, that peer relationships offer an important function particularly in terms of validation and support functions mirrors previous work on peer relationships (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2009). Within the context of peer relationships, children have been found to provide one another with immediate feedback about behaviours that are deemed acceptable and unacceptable. Furthermore, peer interactions may provide opportunities for children to learn social skills and consequently, constitute valuable avenues for learning how to co-operate, resolve conflicts and regulate their own and others' behaviour (Corsaro 1994; Fabes et al. 2003; Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009; Sebanc et al. 2007).

Our next aims were to compare the perspectives of parents and teachers with regard to the level of importance attached to different relationship provisions. Several notable differences emerged. In the child–teacher relationship, parents attributed higher importance to *Socialisation and learning* than teachers across all age groups, with the significant difference lying in relatively lower ratings by teachers for the youngest age group. It could be that parents apply high expectations about children's socialisation and learning (Lane et al. 2007) equally across all age groups, whereas teachers are more responsive to children's age (Hay et al. 2004). This finding may also indicate a perception that some recent commentaries argue

downplays the educational function of teachers' roles with infants in preference for an emphasis on physical and social-emotional caregiving (Rockel 2010; Taggart 2011). Although recent early childhood curriculum developments in Australia and overseas have seen an attempt to reconcile concepts of care and education (e.g., Dahlberg & Moss 2005; Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009), our data suggest that, with teachers of the youngest children, these two broad categories of relationship provisions remain differentiated.

In contrast, teachers rated the *Validation* function higher than parents, suggesting that they attribute greater significance to the value of the mutual and reciprocal contributions of both teacher and child. While their focus is consistent with traditional child centred pedagogies, the inclusion of the child being 'listened to' and being able to 'express his/her opinion' in the validation component suggests that these teachers' views of friendship incorporated a commitment to child agency and contribution that is emphasised in contemporary research and professional literature (Australian Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations 2009; Clark and Moss 2001; Drugli and Undheim 2012).

In the context of peer relationships, teachers again focused on children's voice and their individual social and learning needs by rating *Validation and support* more highly than parents. However, parents attributed higher importance to child *Agency and contribution* than did teachers. This could stem from parents' perceptions of the similarity in status and roles between peers, as opposed to that of the child-teacher relationship, and reflect their desire for their children to become independent, yet co-operative members of their peer group (Lane et al. 2007). Interestingly, while parents' ratings for these two components remained relatively constant across the three age groups, the difference between parent and teacher ratings was again attributable to lower ratings by teachers of younger children when compared to those of preschoolers. Despite contemporary pedagogy suggesting that teachers focus on children's capabilities, and recent research evidence highlighting the social capabilities of very young children (e.g., Degotardi 2011; Selby and Bradley 2003; Williams et al. 2007), it would appear that, for these teachers, social agency and the relevance of peer-derived validation and support are more readily associated with older children.

Limitations and implications for future research

As parents and teachers are increasingly regarded as partners in the care and education of young children, the present findings have the potential to contribute to mutual understandings and thus open channels of communication that can support constructive and respectful relationships between centre staff and families. The design and findings also raise a number of questions for future research. As our survey design is limited in its ability to elucidate the reasons behind the ratings of parents and teachers, future follow-up qualitative studies are needed to explore the nuances of their perspectives and the reasons that brought about the observed differences. In particular, the question of why teachers, as opposed to parents, appear more swayed in their ratings by child age deserves further attention. Does this reflect an enhanced awareness of developmental characteristics of young children brought about by formal education in early childhood or professional experience in group education and care contexts? Or does it reflect a more traditional focus on the physical and emotional needs of infants, rather than their cognitive or social capabilities?

Other avenues for investigation stem from the relatively few respondents obtained from parents or teachers of young infants, from those with relatively low educational backgrounds and those who are male. Our survey was only available in English and attracted mainly English-speaking respondents, so it is likely that we excluded some with language backgrounds other than English whose relationships priorities may well differ substantially from those of English-speaking populations (Weisner 2005). Similarly, with parenting research suggesting that socio-economic status is often significantly linked to parent perspectives about their children (Hoff et al. 2002), it would be a worthwhile independent variable to include in future studies of differences in relationship perspectives.

Finally, our research was limited by not including the perspectives of the children themselves. Future research can take advantage of methodological advances that have been made in regard to researching the views of young children about their childcare experiences (Harcourt et al. 2011) to explore which relationships functions are most valued by children. As early childhood centres increasingly include and cater for diverse populations, comprehensive and inclusive models of relationship pedagogy should strive to incorporate and respect as many perspectives as possible.

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