CREATING SPACES TO HEAR PARENTS' VOICES: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE FAMILIES COMMISSION'S EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION PROJECT INVOLVING SOME MIGRANT AND FORMER REFUGEE FAMILIES

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Abstract

How do recently arrived migrant and former refugee families from non-English-speaking backgrounds in Aotearoa New Zealand balance work, study and childcare? How do they access and experience early childhood care and education? This paper describes and reflects on a Families Commission-funded qualitative research project which sought to generate answers to these questions via focus groups and participatory diagramming. It outlines the context within which the research was commissioned before discussing the rationale and approach adopted. It offers reflections on the lessons learnt from negotiating cultural, linguistic and contextual differences, and from attempting to create appropriate spaces in which to listen to parents' experiences, including the context of the accountability environment of a New Zealand Crown entity.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Formal, high-quality early childhood care and education (ECE) services for pre-school children are important for parents and children alike (Mitchell et al. 2008). These services contribute to parents' and caregivers' opportunities to undertake paid work, upgrade their qualifications, and develop social and cultural connections. They also provide a range of positive educational and social outcomes for children. The Ministry of Education provides financial assistance directly to ECE services in the form of a per-hour subsidy for each child who attends. Subsidy rates depend on the age of the child, whether the service is all-day or sessional, the proportion of qualified teachers, and the type and quality of service provided. From 1 July 2007 the Government has funded up to 20 hours a week of free ECE to children aged three and four years old who attend teacher-led services. A childcare subsidy is also provided by the Ministry of Social Development to assist eligible families with fees.

Participation by pre-school children in ECE services has increased steadily across all ethnic groups over the past 16 years. In 2006 over 94% of New Zealand children had attended some form of ECE before starting school (Ministry of Education 2007). However, rates of participation in ECE vary by ethnicity and are, for example, relatively low for Pasifika children compared with European/Pākehā children (Ministry of Education 2007). There is also a gap in our understanding of how well the ECE needs are met for migrant and former refugee families in Aotearoa New Zealand, especially those facing a range of settlement challenges (e.g. because they are from non-English-speaking backgrounds). Finding appropriate approaches for undertaking research with these families is critical if their voices are to be heard and used to inform policy and operational practice.

Over 60% of the 46,964 people who were granted permanent residency in New Zealand in 2006/07 came from non-English-speaking countries. The largest proportion of these were from China (12% of people granted permanent residency), predominantly in the Skilled/Business and Family Sponsored streams. The second largest group came from India (9%), followed by the Philippines (6%), Fiji (5%), Samoa (4%), South Korea (2%) and Tonga (2%). The 22% of people granted permanent residency during 2006/07 in the source country category of "other" came from around 150 different countries. This included 258 people from Russia, generally in the Skilled/Business or Family Sponsored streams, and 120 people from Iraq in the streams of Skilled/Business (15), Family Sponsored (65) and International/Humanitarian (40).

As a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, New Zealand accepts an annual quota of around 750 refugees within its International/Humanitarian migration stream. In the five years from 2002 to 2007, 3,800 people from 50 different countries were accepted through the quota. In 2006/07 85% of the refugee quota intake was accounted for by people from Myanmar (49%), Afghanistan (30%), Sudan (3%), Iraq (2%) and Iran (1%). The remaining 15% (or 112 individuals) of the quota refugees were in the category of "others". This included 11 people from Eritrea (plus one other from Eritrea in the Family Sponsored Stream) and 27 from Sudan (plus one other in the Skilled/Business stream and four others in the Family Sponsored stream) (Merwood 2008).

This paper describes and reflects on a qualitative research project undertaken on behalf of the Families Commission. It sought to explore the access to, and experiences of, formal and informal early childhood care and education of a range of migrant and former refugee families. This paper briefly outlines the rationale and research approach taken, including the integration of a technique called participatory diagramming into focus groups. It reflects on the lessons learnt from this approach and generates implications for future policy and practice that may be helpful to others carrying out research with these kinds of parents and families.

RATIONALE AND APPROACH

The research was carried out with migrant and former refugee families that face relatively more challenges than other new migrants settling into New Zealand. The decision to work with these groups was made after consultation with agencies and academics working in the area of ECE, including the Ministries of Education and Women's Affairs and the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, in late 2007. The selection took particular account of:

- the Ministry of Education's 10-year strategic plan for ECE (2002–2012), which identifies communities in which current participation is low, and the information that will be collected as part of the longitudinal evaluation of the plan
- major projects on participation and access for Māori, Pacific and rural families that are either planned or underway within the Ministry of Education
- earlier work by the Families Commission, including Focus on Families (Stevens et al. 2005), *What makes Your Family Tick?* (Seth-Purdie et al. 2006) and *Migrant Families Now and in the Future* (Families Commission n.d.).

The mandate of the Families Commission to "advocate for the interests of families" (section 7[1] Families Commission Act 2003) and to "have regard to the needs, values and beliefs … of other ethnic and cultural groups in New Zealand" (section 11[c] Families Commission Act

2003) supported the need for research that focuses on the perspectives of families themselves rather than the perspectives of funding agencies or service providers.

In 2006/07 the Families Commission consulted migrant and former refugee families about their needs. This consultation highlighted the importance of exploring options for ECE to respond to the distinctive requirements of these families, particularly the:

- cultural and integration needs of families, and the need for childcare to help parents to access English-language learning
- needs that arose for some migrant and former refugee families from the lack of informal support for child care because of limited family and friendship networks in New Zealand (Families Commission n.d.).

The Families Commission was particularly interested in filling gaps in both existing research evidence and planned research initiatives on the ECE needs of migrant and former refugee families as part of its Even Up programme of work aimed at ensuring families have real choices that enable them to balance work and family commitments.

The small-scale qualitative study discussed here provided an exploration of some migrant and former refugee families' preferences and priorities for formal and informal ECE. It adopted a post-positivist approach that recognised the embeddedness of all knowledge within the social relationships and contexts that produce it (Bondi et al. 2002), and did not seek to be statistically representative or produce generalisations. Rather, to meet the research aims, it sought to identify information-rich cases of groups that were as diverse as possible (Krueger and Casey 2000) via a purposeful sampling approach (Patton 2002).

Six groups around the country were identified. These groups involved parents with very different migration histories and settlement experiences in New Zealand, and varied socio-economic backgrounds, ECE needs and priorities.[1] A focus group with academic experts and practitioners in ECE with expertise on the needs of migrant and former refugee communities was also held in Wellington. This was scheduled to occur part-way through the analysis of focus group discussions to enable deeper probing of issues raised by parents. Groups were also chosen to represent four main areas of migrant and former refugee settlement in New Zealand (Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington and Christchurch), and two prominent religious faiths in this country (Christianity and Islam).

The Families Commission networks provided access to Mandarin-speaking parents through the Waikato Migrant Resource Centre in Hamilton and Russian-speaking parents through the Multicultural Learning Centre and the Russian Community School in Christchurch. Opportunities also arose to work with particular recently migrated and former refugee groups through the contracted researcher (Sara) and her association with Changemakers Refugee Forum in Wellington. In this way, Assyrian, Eritrean and Sudanese parents in Wellington and a pan-ethnic group of mothers in Auckland were involved. The pan-ethnic group involved migrants from India, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and a former refugee from Afghanistan. The purposeful sampling strategy also aimed to ensure that the research included parents from some communities that had not previously been involved in Families Commission

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[1] We also interviewed two key informants connected with Muslim communities in Auckland and Wellington about their efforts to establish Islamic childcare centres.

consultations or research. Their participation enabled the Families Commission to hear from representatives of some cultural groups about whom little is known in New Zealand.

The key criteria for parents' inclusion in a focus group were their arrival in New Zealand since 2003 and their primary responsibility for their pre-school children. In the majority of cases, these criteria resulted in higher participation from mothers, and, in total, 41 mothers and two fathers participated in the focus groups.

Within each community the researchers liaised with local (informal) leaders or resource people to explain the purpose and aims of the research, clarify process requirements and ethical issues, recruit participants, and in some cases arrange meeting places and transport. These intermediaries played a vital role in identifying appropriate participants. They were also helpful in guiding ethical considerations and enabling participants to make informed decisions about how they wished to take part and be represented in the research. The exact ways in which they recruited participants and arranged focus groups varied according to community size, location and social networks. In some cases, participating parents had existing relationships through regular play-groups or community kindergartens (pan-ethnic Muslim group and Russian group). In other cases, parents knew each other through social or religious networks (Assyrian, Eritrean and Sudanese groups). In the case of Chinese-speaking parents in Hamilton, while some participants had no prior connections, they exchanged contact details at the focus group and have met subsequently to support each other.

Within face-to-face interactions, a focus group method that incorporated the technique of participatory diagramming was adopted. Focus groups provide a means of generating knowledge about people's lives as well as reshaping understanding so that new responses might be developed (Cameron 2005). Goss and Leinbach (1996) also highlight the fact that the collective nature of focus groups can enable participants and researchers to negotiate and potentially transform their understanding of the situation under examination. This point is reinforced by Gibson-Graham (1994).

Between four and eight parents participated in each group (as recommended by most focus group practitioners). This encouraged and enabled all participants to talk and share their perspectives. Most participants chose to speak in English as much as possible, even where interpreting support was available. In one group, an outside interpreter was employed by the Families Commission, and in two others the group organiser (who happened to be a qualified interpreter) provided translations. In other groups a person with whom parents felt comfortable provided additional support as needed.

Parents were asked to talk about:
* their family contexts and history of living and working in New Zealand
* their current ECE arrangements and needs, including what support they relied on from outside the home, such as formal centres, playgroups, family members and friends
* the impacts of these arrangements on family members, including whose needs were or were not being met through these arrangements
* their experiences of and priorities for ECE
* their ideal ECE arrangements
* the reasons why their ideal arrangements were not possible at the time, where this was the case.

To facilitate inclusive, in-depth discussion of these questions we used a participatory diagramming technique, where possible. Participatory diagramming is becoming a popular technique in social science research that has a "social good" or emancipatory orientation (Kesby et al. 2005). It was first developed in the 1980s by non-governmental organisations working in community development in India and Africa with pre-literate peoples as a means of practising more inclusive development and planning (Kesby 2001). Since then it has spread throughout the world in various forms associated with community development, public participation processes and civic engagement (Kindon et al. 2007).

Participatory diagramming is a versatile technique that offers a means of democratising the research process by enabling a shift away from purely verbal discussion to visual representation and associated discussion (Slocum et al. 1995). Participants, either individually or collectively, represent their situations visually, then verbally, drawing and discussing specific details, negotiating differences and identifying commonalities as they go. (For examples, see Figures 1 and 2.) The focus of discussion centres on the representations rather than the individuals – a process known as "interviewing the map" (Chambers 2002). This process generates specific and reliable information and reduces the chance that particular group members will dominate or sway opinion, or that the group will talk in generalities or orient towards agreement, which is common in focus groups (Myers 1998). With the use of participatory diagramming, quieter, less confident or verbally quick members of a group have a vehicle through which to more easily participate and voice their experiences and concerns (Alexander et al. 2007).

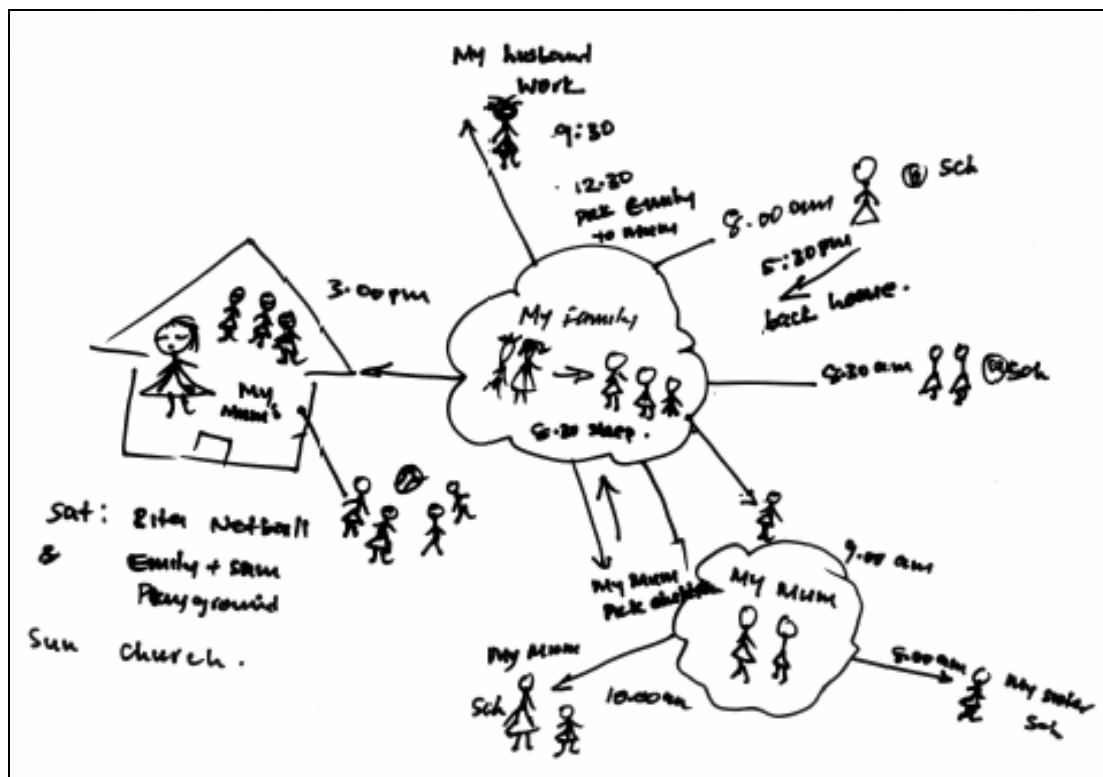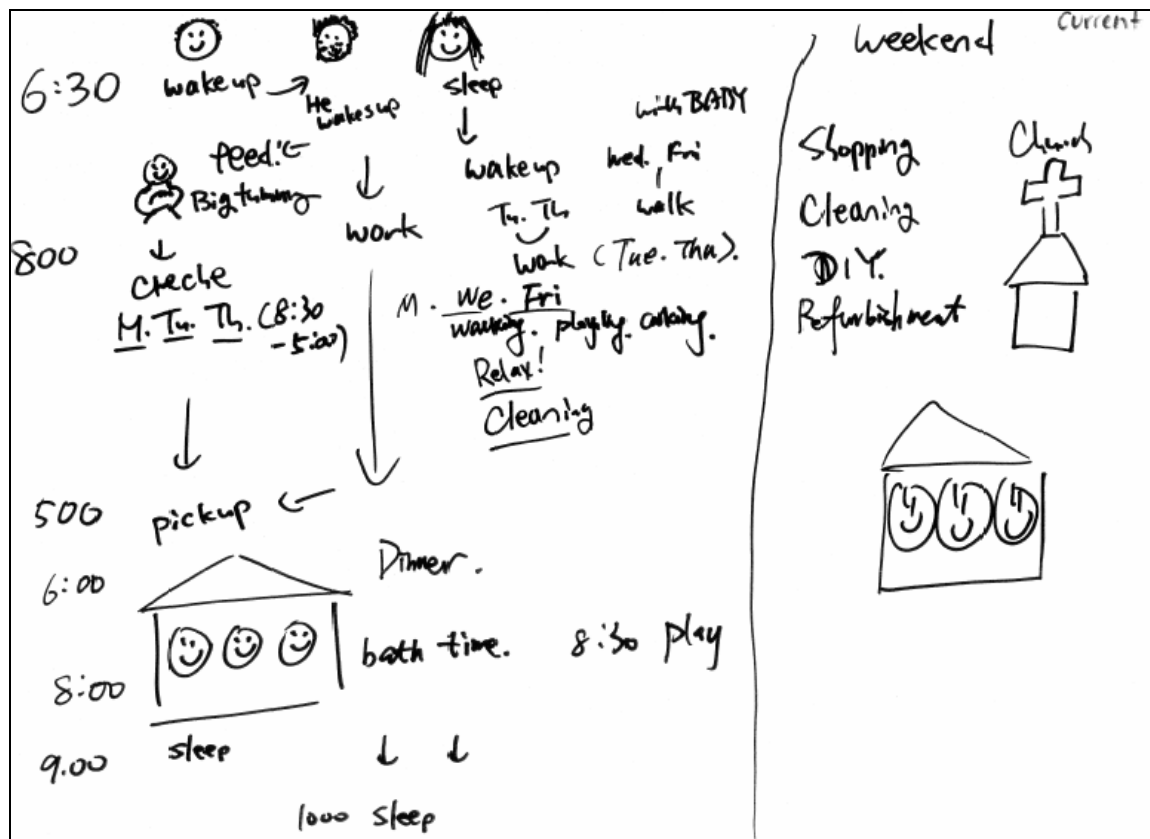**Figure 1 One Sudanese Family's Current ECE Arrangements**

Figure 2 One Chinese-Japanese Family's Current ECE Arrangements

In addition to the specific research methods and techniques adopted, at each meeting parents were provided with food and a koha.[2] Food is a well-known means of hosting people and can act as a cross-cultural bridge to establish or build relationships (Longhurst et al. 2008). The koha of a $50 grocery voucher was provided to thank parents for their time (up to three hours by people who had taken time off work in some cases), and to acknowledge some of the other costs for participants of attending meetings. A koha was also provided to the organisers if they were not already focus group participants or were not already being paid by their community organisation to support the groups. In addition to these means of reciprocity, the Families Commission paid for transport and provided a childcare worker (and toys) to overcome barriers to participation that would have otherwise been insurmountable for some parents. Parents clearly appreciated this consideration and support.

At various points throughout the research process parents were informed and reminded of their right to participate (or not) to the extent that they felt happy about it. They were told about other aspects of the research process, including procedures for the collection, storage, attribution and dissemination of their information. This approach to informing participants of their rights and obtaining informed consent throughout the recruitment and research process

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[2] *Koha* is a Māori term that is commonly understood as "gift" or something exchanged as a symbol of a reciprocal relationship between two parties. It is traditionally laid down by outsiders (*manuhiri*) when visiting the meeting house (*marae*) of the home people to a particular area (*tangata whenua*) during a welcome ritual known as a *powhiri*. Today it has been adopted and integrated into wider contexts to acknowledge when something is given to the host people – in this case participating parents – to reciprocate their non-material gifts of time and information given to the visitors – in this case, the researchers.

was in accordance with procedures that were approved by the Families Commission Ethics Committee to respond to the needs of individual participants with varying levels of literacy in English. Parents in four of the six groups gave permission to tape-record their discussions, and these recordings were complemented by notes taken by the researchers. In the other two groups, permission was not given (and reasons for this decision were not sought), so detailed notes were taken. Parents in some groups also gave permission for their diagrams and for photographs of the focus groups to be reproduced in various publications.

Once focus groups were completed, transcripts were made of the audio-recordings and notes were written up. A process of margin coding (Bertrand et al. 1992) was used to identify key themes for subsequent analysis, and quotations were selected to represent or illustrate the similarities and differences within and between participating families and communities. In addition to this article, a community report has been produced. This is written in language that aims to be accessible to a lay audience with English as a second or third language, and in a highly illustrated format that is intended to appeal to, and privilege the interests and voices of, participating parents. Such a report was considered to be one means of feeding back parents' experiences and sharing emerging findings across the different communities (Broome and Kindon 2008). It has been designed to support their own knowledge and future action, and will hopefully be of interest to other parties also. The Families Commission is also developing an advocacy programme based on the findings of this research, which will pursue complementary ways of informing future policy and practice.

REFLECTIONS ON OUR APPROACH TO RESEARCHING WITH MIGRANT AND FORMER REFUGEE FAMILIES

Throughout the research we adopted an epistemological orientation that sought to access the thoughts and ideas of participants by recognising and responding actively to them and developing a sense of connection with the parents as active subjects in their own lives (Rienharz 1992). Such an orientation reflects post-positivist, critical and emancipatory frameworks found in feminist, post-colonial and participatory research practices. Our orientation and approach could also be regarded as an example of critically reflective practice (Schön 1983, Thompson and Thompson 2008). Through this approach we sought to question and not take for granted social arrangements in these families, and connect the micro-level processes operating within families around ECE arrangements and priorities with social and political processes at a macro level. We also actively sought to engage parents from communities who in most cases were relatively new to New Zealand and about whom little was known. As such, we adopted an ethic of care as we worked to overcome linguistic, logistical and cultural barriers so as to make our research as inclusive as possible (see also McFarlane and Hansen 2007).

For example, working with local leaders and resource people was essential, but this took time. In general, the larger the community and the longer its older members had been in New Zealand, and the more socially connected the parents were to a particular centre or playgroup, the easier it was to organise the groups. However, in one case, the clarification of the research purpose, the identification of potential participants and the organisation of the meeting place and transport took multiple phone conversations over almost a month with three different people before final arrangements and participants were agreed. This experience revealed the importance of persevering with relationship building, particularly where participants were not used to being engaged in research processes, had only recently settled in New Zealand and had limited capability in English. It also demonstrated the necessity of allowing sufficient

time in the project plan to accommodate this important dimension of relationship building and clarification of research purpose.

We also worked hard to ensure groups met in informal settings familiar to them, including community centres and church halls, usually within easy reach of parents' homes by foot or car. In all cases, our willingness to meet at times and in places convenient to participating parents enabled their participation and communicated our readiness to adapt to their situations. It also put us into "their" spaces rather than inviting them into "our" spaces. Meeting in such spaces familiar to participants helped to redistribute some control over the research process, either through their involvement in booking the space or through their greater knowledge of it once we were there (McFarlane and Hansen 2007). Being in these spaces also gave us some insight into their wider community relationships and, in some cases, the challenges they face in meeting some of their ECE needs.

Our orientation to the research also meant that when in "their spaces" we adopted a very flexible and inclusive approach to focus group organisation and facilitation and did not seek to rigidly apply the same process with each group. Rather, we practised what Schön (1983) has termed "professional artistry" as we used the knowledge bases of our professions "as the cloth from which to cut appropriate solutions to fit the requirements of a specific practice situation" (Thompson and Thompson 2008:15). So in the case of the pan-ethnic mothers in Auckland, we met in the morning, opened with a prayer and moved through the generation and discussion of diagrams before closing with a shared lunch. In Christchurch, however, Russian mothers began talking almost immediately, and so diagrams about their current and ideal childcare arrangements came later – almost as a distillation of the discussion, just before we ended and had lunch. With Assyrian mothers in Wellington we met in the evening and opened with dinner (some of which one of the women had cooked so we researchers could enjoy Assyrian food) before having a very lively discussion interspersed with storytelling and a lot of joking and laughter. In this group, diagramming did not happen at all: the large number of babies sitting on knees or being breastfed prevented the women from producing diagrams. In the focus group with Eritrean parents, which started with lunch, the small number of parents with pre-school children (four) and their relatively dispersed residential distribution across Wellington and Lower Hutt meant that these participants chose to focus on reconnecting with each other and talking with us rather than producing diagrams.

Although participatory diagramming was not used in each group, where it was it proved to be helpful to enriching information and subsequent discussion. All participants were communicating in their second (or third) language. Being able to visually represent and then talk gave each parent time to think and communicate their particular circumstances in more depth than might otherwise have been the case. Some, who had only very recently arrived in New Zealand, were not always confident about expressing the complexity of their childcare arrangements verbally, even with the support of an interpreter. Where they did so, the technique gave them an opportunity to first discuss their diagram or time-line with the interpreter before presenting it, thereby ensuring a more accurate communication of the detail and complexity of their ECE arrangements. In addition, the diagrams produced provided a helpful snapshot of ECE arrangements in 2008 and a rich data source for subsequent deeper analysis if needed.

Each group had its own rhythm and flow, and while the research questions were discussed with all parents to generate comparative information, we drew on Schön's (1983) concept of "reflection-in-action" as a means to respond to the specific conditions and interpersonal

relationships in each location. This reflexivity enabled us to maintain rapport and focus in ways appropriate to each group of parents, and to embrace the diversity of their experiences and priorities. As a result, we were able to generate information responding to the key questions we were exploring across all groups, while doing so in ways that respected and responded to their different relationships with each other and the topic under discussion. This approach helped us to balance our focus on common themes while preserving attention to diversity. It also helped us to tap into and connect with the emotional register of what was being communicated by individuals or within a group. In many cases, this ongoing reflection-in-action was essential in order to listen beyond the words being said (sometimes in broken English) and to attend to aspects of body language to help understand the deeper meanings and values being communicated, a point we return to below.

It was helpful to have participants who shared common characteristics: recently arrived in New Zealand and with primary responsibility for pre-school children, or faith, or ethnic/national identity. These characteristics provided an important context from which to inform the future provision of ECE and to enhance settlement outcomes. They also facilitated an environment in which participants felt comfortable about sharing their attitudes and beliefs (Krueger and Casey 2000), particularly about potentially sensitive topics associated with parenting and childcare (see also Hoppe et al. 1995). Such commonality also enabled us to listen for differences in needs and experiences within and between groups.

We also practised "reflection-on-action" (Schön 1983), or iterative cycles of reflection and action as they are known in the participatory research literature (Bradbury and Reason 2001), as we progressed from one group to the next. By looking back at what had happened in a critical way and using the results of this process, together with our professional knowledge, we tackled each new group situation slightly differently (see Proctor 1993). For example, as we went along we incorporated more self-disclosure into our introductions as a means of situating ourselves in relation to the topic under discussion, both professionally and personally. In the first group, we made only brief mention of our roles as mothers (Sara and Bridget) and grandmother (Anne), our ethnicities, and our length of residence in New Zealand. As we went on we disclosed more details about our ages, work history and, most importantly, our experiences in our multiple roles, and the negotiations and juggling that these demanded from us. These more process-oriented reflections on our own complex positions and feelings as workers, partners and carers for small children enabled us to connect in many ways with the experiences of participating parents. They helped to soften "any perceived or potential power hierarchies" (McFarlane and Hansen 2007:91, drawing on Oakley 1981) between us, and enabled participants' assertion of their agency within discussions (Kesby 2005).

In particular, what became apparent as we progressed with the focus groups was the importance of attending not only to the factual details of parents' day-to-day arrangements and needs, but to the embodied and emotional experiences associated with them. Parenting is widely acknowledged to be hard work and a "labour of love"; through our attention to emotions evident in what parents chose to communicate, their body language as they spoke, and the responses of others to what and how they communicated, we learnt most about different parents' ECE needs and priorities. Attention to these embodied (verbal and non-verbal) dimensions of communication helped us to flesh out the diagrams and discussions of parents' ongoing arrangements and aspirations. Participants also talked "through" their bodies, using examples of what happens if they become sick, their need for "mummy-time", the challenges they faced integrating exercise into their weekly schedules, or getting their

older female relatives caring for their children out of their homes to ensure their children got some exercise. This told us a great deal about the very real impacts of childcare arrangements on their family relationships and their own and other family members' physical and emotional health.

What seemed to be particularly salient here in terms of our facilitation of these sensitive discussions was the aspect of embodied empathy we were able to convey through our relative "insiderness" as mothers and grandmother. The value of our roles and lived experiences was particularly noticeable in the focus group with Sudanese mothers, where Sara, physically weary from her own negotiations of working motherhood and part-time study, was able to mirror and draw out some of the deeper implications facing participants in similar contexts. In the group with Russian mothers, a different but equally important point of connection emerged around shared frustrations about the limited communication of ECE arrangements and curriculum to parents, and this led to the generation of quite specific discussions and recommendations. For Anne, juggling the demands of being a grandmother with other work enabled us to explore the wider impacts of childcare on other members in participants' families, such as grandparents and older siblings. These aspects of empathy and the associated processes of mirroring, reflecting back and challenging/probing we believe encouraged parents' agency in ways that perhaps might have been missed had researchers who lacked this "insiderness" been involved. They also seemed to help transcend more obvious differences associated with class, race and ethnicity commonly identified as markers of "outsiderness" in social research, to convey our genuine interest in these families' lives.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, PRACTICE AND POLICY

For research fieldwork of this kind to adequately grapple with the complexity involved in migrant and former refugee families' choices regarding their priorities for ECE, attention must be paid to the emotional and embodied experiences of parents as they go about their daily lives caring and providing for their children. Moreover, there is a need to think through more clearly the embodied contexts within which research information is generated, including the role of the researchers' bodies in these contexts. Ideally, these bodies should also have experiential knowledge of what it means to give birth and/or have major responsibility for small children. As social science increasingly attempts to grapple with the messiness of "real life" (see Longhurst et al. 2007), the importance of embodiment, empathy and emotions becomes more evident. The need for this was clearly reflected in the following statement:

> "[Y]ou are the first person to come to our community. This is the first time we are sitting down and we are telling our problems to you because you're doing your research, but otherwise there's nobody [who] talked [to us] from any organisation that thought, 'Oh well, there people been migrated to New Zealand and they're settled in such places. What are they doing? How are they progressing?' So we just come here and we're given houses and we have our kids going to school. Nobody knows what is going on behind the curtain and [it] is all very hard. We need people to come into the community, to come into the ground and see what is happening, not just doing the research on the Internet." (Sudanese mother, 3 May 2008).

In terms of practice, the orientation of our work reflected aspects of a participatory action research approach in as far as we attempted to incorporate the potential for:
• the adaptation of the approach to each focus group, in response to the local contexts and priorities

- inclusion of, and particular probing in relation to, local content as it emerged during the focus group
- participants' empowerment through the research process and methods adopted.

Such an orientation to research fieldwork does not necessarily sit comfortably within institutional practice associated with requirements for accountability. The Families Commission, like other New Zealand government agencies, requires detailed project aims, methods, timelines and budgets to be specified in advance (State Services Commission 1999) of any research being undertaken. Paradoxically, these accountability requirements can act as a constraint on the conduct of family-oriented and empowering qualitative research.

As the details provided in this paper illustrate, it can be difficult to anticipate the responses of intended research participants, who may or may not agree to participate, or who may only agree to do so within a particular timeframe because they are active rather than passive in their interactions with the research process. It is also hard to determine in advance what modifications to process may be needed in an effort to be culturally appropriate and inclusive with diverse groups. The "spaces between research methodologies, ethical principles, institutional regulations and human subjects as individuals and as socially organised actors and communities is tricky ground … because it is complicated and changeable … and dangerous for the unsuspecting qualitative traveller" (Smith 2005:85).

For qualitative researchers to effectively work their way through this tricky ground, they need a sophisticated understanding of the theoretical implications of, and methodological alternatives for, adapting their approach as they respond to new information and cultural expectations (Smith 2005). They will also be able to meet the requirement for "situational responsiveness and strategic, contingency thinking … in working with primary intended users" (Patton 1997:18).

Finally, researchers doing qualitative, exploratory research need a "client" who is "interested and knowledgeable" (Patton 1997:18). For this research, the Families Commission required a small-scale qualitative study to explore a new area of interest. It had well-established processes for ensuring the research was appropriately managed, including a rigorous ethics approval process and flexible systems for supporting researchers in negotiating the necessary "tricky ground". As the "client" for this research, the Families Commission provided a clear but open question, a "knowledgeable" and appropriate specification for a qualitative approach, and an "interested" management context that both supported the research process and fulfilled the duty of a government-funded agent. We recommend the approach to other government agencies wishing to support effective, inclusive and interactive research with migrant and former refugee families in the future.

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