

Whose Job Is It? Parents' Perspectives on Volunteering to Help in New Zealand Kindergartens

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Abstract

Volunteering to help is a traditional type of parental involvement in early childhood education. There have been concerns over the justification of teachers' practice of leaving their work with parents, particularly for routine tasks such as washing and cleaning, however, little research has been conducted to scrutinize the practice and examine parents' experiences with volunteering to help. Based on a sample of 25 parents from New Zealand public kindergartens, this study investigates parents' experiences with three types of volunteering to help at the kindergarten. Analysis of the semi-structured interview data has revealed enhancers (e.g., benefits for the child, justification of fundraising) and impediments (e.g., limited time, school commitment) to parent volunteering to help as well as the tensions in practice (e.g., relying on core parents, limited resource). The findings support the legitimacy of routine tasks and fundraising and highlight the importance of parent volunteering to help.

Keywords : parental involvement, volunteering, early childhood, New Zealand

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Introduction

Parent volunteering to help has been widely used as a type of parental involvement (Epstein, 1995, 2010) and a strategy to establish school-family partnerships (Scully, Barbour, & Roberts-King, 2015), and it is particularly a common practice in early childhood settings (Bruce, Meggitt, & Grenier, 2014; Powell, 2013).

In New Zealand, kindergartens are community owned, operate on a not-for-profit basis, employ qualified and registered teachers, and are administered by regional kindergarten associations (Education Review Office, 2007). Since the inception of the Free Kindergarten movement in New Zealand in 1889, parent volunteers have played an important role in the operation of the kindergartens (Hughes, 1989). In the history of kindergartens, two types of parents were more inclined to volunteer to help, one type being ‘women of great abilities [who] put into [the] work time and effort which could have gone on the social round’ (Hughes, 1989, p. 39). Another type of parents were those ‘who wanted more contact with her children’s schooling and [whose] involvement in kindergarten could be seen as an extension of her domestic and maternal role’ (Hughes, 1989, p. 40). Although New Zealand society has undergone significant social, political and economic changes in the past one and a quarter centuries, parent volunteering to help as a tradition in public kindergartens has been brought forward. The current policy of New Zealand kindergartens encourages parents to get involved in the parent help roster, parent committee, and resource development (Central Otago Kindergarten Association, 2014). Of particular relevance, a large kindergarten association proclaims its fundraising policy:

‘Donations from parents/whānau and ongoing fundraising efforts are necessary to make up the shortfall [of the government funding].... [Parents’] contribution will help to alleviate the financial pressure that kindergartens face. Without the pressure to continually fundraise and seek additional funding, teachers will be able to continue to focus on teaching the children’ (Auckland Kindergarten Association, 2015).

Some conceptual issues have arisen around the topic of volunteering to help. Of particular relevance to this study is whether there are any volunteer opportunities that are inherently the wrong choices in any sense. For example, Briggs and Potter (1999) criticized some

educational institutions for '(viewing) the parent as an unpaid, untrained aide who performs routine tasks relating to the preparation of materials and who cleans up after teachers' (pp. 432-433). Hendrick and Weissman (2011) warned against activities that were 'just to comply with a mandated family involvement component' (p. 28). Further, they stressed that 'whatever activity is selected...it should not be demeaning (cleaning the animal cages, for example)' (p. 28). Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, and Farmer (2015) asserted that 'asking family members to engage in meaningless tasks such as cutting fruit or covering books' (pp. 42-43) was ineffectual. Somewhat contrary to this kind of criticism and warning, other researchers place no restriction on the repertoire of parent volunteer experiences. For example, writing about building partnerships for educating young children, Scully, et al. (2015) recommended that 'parents can help by making play dough, sewing smocks, or cutting out items, and many parents are happy to participate in this way' (p. 285). The subtle discrepancy in rhetoric has led to tremendous confusion in real practice, for example, how do practitioners know what volunteer opportunity is 'demeaning' or 'meaningless'? What volunteer opportunities should practitioners never utilize? Little, if any, research has been conducted to address such discrepancy and confusion, in particular, little research has examined parents' experiences with volunteering to help.

Literature review

Parent volunteering to help is conceptually inseparable from parental involvement and school-parent partnership. Parental involvement and parent-school partnership are two conceptually different but practically entangled concepts. Epstein (1995, 2010) classified parental involvement into parenting, communicating with teachers, volunteering to help at school, helping with the child's learning at home, participating in school decision making, and community engagement. Pugh and DiAth (1989) defined partnership as 'a working relationship that is characterized by...a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability' cited in (Curtis & O'Hagan, 2009, p. 92). Kim, et al. (2012) observed that 'previous research has failed to operationalise the variables of interest, or failed to differentiate' (p. 4) between the two concepts. According to Curtis and O'Hagan (2009), 'In many cases it would appear that the two terms are interchangeable... Many textbooks have

chapters entitled *partnership with parents*, when the content of the chapter is actually on involvement of parents or parent participation' (p. 92).

Epstein's (1995, 2010) seminal typology includes volunteering to help as one of the six types of parental involvement. Epstein (2010) defined *volunteer* to mean 'anyone who supports school goals and children's learning or development in any way, at any place, and at any time not just during the school day and at the school building' (p. 86). Endorsing Epstein's typology, Fantuzzo, Tighe, and Childs (2000) developed a 42-item Family Involvement Questionnaire (FIQ) in the early childhood education context, and included in school-based involvement such items - 'I volunteer in my child's classroom', 'I go on class trips with my child', and 'I participate in fundraising activities in my child's school'. Fantuzzo, et al.'s (2013) shortened version of the FIQ included 'I volunteer in my child's classroom' and 'I go on class trips with my child'.

In schools, volunteering is often taken as a key measure of parental involvement (Bower & Griffin, 2011). Traditional definitions of parental involvement are related to parents' investment of time and money (Bower & Griffin, 2011). According to Christianakis (2011), parental involvement has been misinterpreted as pure 'helping' in some under-resourced schools, and examples of such helping included 'being available to the teacher during the day, participating in classroom activities and special projects, completing assigned tasks with children, organizing and cleaning up materials, and providing supplies requested by the school' (p. 164).

It has been a tradition in early childhood education that parental involvement consists of parents helping out such as, centre fundraising, helping with snack times, contributing to the management committee, assisting with centre excursion, distributing newsletters, as visitors sharing a special skill or interest with the children' (Curtis & O'Hagan, 2009, pp. 92-93). Powell (2013) recommended projects such as developing and maintaining a garden that offers opportunities for parents to participate as well as hands-on experiences for children's learning.

Volunteering to help produces 'a public good (improved school quality for all students) and private benefits (e.g., better class placement)' (Gee, 2011, p. 552). Having parent volunteers in school can 'help the school function better, particularly large urban schools that have experienced budget cuts limiting the number of office staff, art teachers and grounds-maintenance staff' (Zellman & Perlman, 2006, p. 523). According to Epstein (2010), parent

volunteering could result in students' 'improved skill in communicating with adults and increased learning of skills that receive tutoring or target attention from volunteers' (p. 87). Parent volunteering could also lead to parents' 'enhanced understanding of teacher's job, increased comfort in school, carry-over of school activities at home, and self-confidence about ability to work in school and with children or to take steps to improve own education' (Epstein, 2010, p. 87). In the early childhood context, the benefits of parent volunteering to help has long been established, for example, parent volunteering can 'help parents connect with professionals, feel comfortable, and make contact with other parents' (Stonehouse & Gonzalez-Mena, 2004, p. 24), '[be] essential to a centre that is under-funded' (MacNaughton, 2003, p. 268), and 'capitalize on the interests and strengths of the volunteer' (Hendrick & Weissman, 2011, p. 28).

MacNaughton (2003) addressed occasions when teachers invited parent volunteering to help simply because they were not comfortable with other types of parental involvement. Parent volunteering to help has been so preferred that some schools use 'parent contracts' 'specifying the number of hours of service required from each family annually' (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & Pedro, 2011, p. 86).

Christianakis (2011) observed that viewing parents as assistants or helpers rather than partners was 'in sharp contrast to parent partnership models employed in middle class communities, where helping teachers is just one of many aspects of productive partnerships' (p. 164). Similarly, Bower and Griffin (2011) commented that parent volunteering essentially makes 'demands of parents to help facilitate the success of the school, while reciprocal demands are not made of the school to ensure the success of their families' (p. 78). Also, some researchers have expressed concerns over the value of certain types of parent volunteering to help (Briggs & Potter, 1999; Arthur, et al., 2015), and have warned that parental involvement should not be used 'as a way of getting tasks done' (Arthur, et al., 2015, p. 42).

Parent volunteering to help has also been linked to equity issues. Christianakis (2011) held that parent help 'privileged those parents, and the children of parents, who had the economic and temporal capacity to do help labour' (p. 172). Another equity issue is related to teachers' use, intentional or unintentional, of 'exceptionally involved parents' (Christianakis, 2011, p. 173).

In summary, the relevant literature as reviewed above displays three patterns. First, there is a lack of empirical research-based literature on volunteering to help in early childhood education settings. Essentially all of the literature available has been position statements, anecdotal narratives, or reflective discussions which either lack a focus on the phenomenon of parent volunteering to help or do not involve proper data collection. Second, while it has been widely acknowledged that parent volunteering to help is beneficial for children, parents, teachers, and the early childhood services, there have been ambiguity and inconsistency in the literature with regard to the purpose and legitimate types of volunteering to help. Specifically, there is no consensus on whether and to what extent parents should be encouraged to volunteer to do the 'routine tasks'. Further, little weight has been given to parents' perspectives in the discussions (Gee, 2011). To address these gaps, drawing on the data collected from the parents on their own experiences with volunteering to help, this study attempts to answer the question: What are parents' perceptions of volunteering to help in an early childhood education setting? In light of Patton's (1990) notion that the phenomenon would be manifested more intensely if the information-rich cases were chosen for qualitative studies, We purposefully chose kindergartens as the sample in this study with a view to obtaining enriched data on parents' perspectives on parent volunteering to help.

Methods

Operational definition

While all Newzealand kindergartens and their umbrella organizations have unique philosophies, they all embrace the notion of parent volunteering. Based on the kindergartens' philosophy statements published on their websites as well as the items related to volunteering to help in Fantuzzo et al.'s (2000) Family Involvement Questionnaire (FIQ), three types of volunteering to help were selected as the focus of this study, and therefore, notwithstanding its great variety, volunteering to help in this study was defined to include volunteering to help at the kindergarten sessions, volunteering to help with the kindergarten trips, and volunteering to help with the kindergarten fundraising activities.

Data collection

The data collection for this study was the following phase of a quantitative study reported in Zhang, Keown, and Farrugia (2014). Zhang et al. (2014) surveyed 127 native English speaking parents who were randomly selected from 50 public kindergartens in Auckland, New Zealand. The survey asked the parents how often they participated in a range of parental involvement activities including the three types of volunteering to help defined in this study. Following up on Zhang and colleagues' survey, this study involved semi-structured interviews with a small proportion of the participants in Zhang et al. (2014) who were selected on a voluntary basis. The ethics approval was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. All relevant ethics concerns were addressed through a comprehensive Participant Information Sheet and signed Informed Consent Form.

To recruit the interviewees, the researcher made phone calls to parents who ticked the option in the Informed Consent Form for Zhang et al.'s (2014) survey 'I agree to complete the parent survey AND to be contacted about the possibility of taking part in a semi-structure interview'. When scheduling interviews, the researcher ensured that the time and venue for each interview be chosen by the parent. During the period from August 2010 to May 2011, a total of 25 participants were interviewed. All participants chose to be interviewed in their homes. While the overall interview covered four types of parental involvement (i.e., communication with teachers, parent volunteering to help, helping with the child's learning at home, and participating in the kindergarten's decision making) and lasted 30-50 minutes, the part of each interview focusing on parent volunteering to help lasted 10-15 minutes. All the interviews were audio taped and transcribed for analysis.

The 25 parents were all mothers from 16 kindergartens. The average age of the mothers was 38 years. The average age of the target children (12 boys, 13 girls) was 51 months, and the average length of time that the target children had attended the kindergarten at the time of survey was 10 months. Nearly one quarter (24%) of the participants self-identified as 'home maker', 40% were 'unemployed', and 36% were 'part-time workers/self-employed'. The annual household income of 96% of the participants fell within the categories of NZ\$40,000-60,000 and above, and 40% of the participants had a household income that exceeded NZ\$100,000. Interview participants were identified in this study using the same identification

number assigned in the survey.

Three questions were asked in each interview: (1) Following up on the parent questionnaire you had completed, could you provide more information on your volunteering to help with the kindergarten sessions? (2) Could you provide more information on your volunteering to help with the kindergarten trips? (3) Could you provide more information on your volunteering to help with the kindergarten fundraising activities? Prompts (e.g., what? why? how?) were used to enable participants to supply detailed and nuanced descriptions.

Data analysis and findings

The purpose of the study was not to obtain descriptive details about parents volunteering to help but to identify key explanatory concepts relating to parents' perception of volunteering to help (e.g., usefulness, tension) and the relationships among them. Glaser's (1978) coding technique for the grounded theory method serves the purpose well. Like many other studies that 'use grounded theory as a practical coding method...rather than as the theorizing device' (Urquhart, 2013, p. 2), this study adopted a three-stage coding technique -open coding (going through the data line by line, attaching codes to the data, and staying open), selective coding (grouping the open codes into categories), and theoretical coding (identifying relationships between the categories) (Glaser, 1978).

The three-stage coding generated three themes (enhancers to volunteering to help, Impediments to volunteering to help, tension and mediation) that included 18 categories.

Enhancers to volunteering to help

Four categories emerged from the participants' responses to the first interview question (volunteering to help with the kindergarten sessions) as factors enhancing parent volunteering—various types of volunteering (52%), benefit for the child (40%), transition (8%), and parent help roster (8%). The percentage in the parentheses represents the proportion of parents that contributed to a particular category.

Over half of the parents described a range of different types of volunteering to help at the

kindergarten session available to them, as a parent illustrated, *"I would always do the dishes, clean up the food plates, I always do the end of term clean up, always do something, tend to be cleaning the kitchen at the moment, seems to be my thing, but no I don't ever stay a whole session"* (152). Parents detailed the benefits for the children of volunteering to help at the session. One benefit was the opportunity of uninterrupted reading for the children, as a parent depicted, *'There are a lot of children, and there are only a certain number of teachers ... They really like parents reading to children more often because they start reading a story and they get interrupted, they need to go and do something else'* (117). A parent elucidated an indirect benefit for the children: *'They have four teachers for thirty odd children, so I think a lot of what we do as volunteers is cutting up the food and the fruit, doing the dishes and helping with messy table work, and it leaves the teachers a bit more free to see the big picture, to see the educational aspects'* (298). Such an indirect benefit was elaborated by another parent: *'Teachers are there trained to be doing their teaching and supporting of the children, there is so much that can be done in the kindergarten, cataloguing information, cleaning, preparing materials, all that stuff that just takes so much of the teachers' time when you would rather have them working with children'* (277). Some parents reported transition to be the reason for volunteering to help at the session, as it was spelt out, *'For Issac we went through a time where he was unsettled, so I stayed a few more sessions to help him be more confident, and feel more secure there'* (112). The kindergarten parent help roster was also perceived to be an enhancer to volunteering to help at the session, as a parent pronounced, *"Parents are scheduled in to assist at kindy once per term, so I do that side of things"* (117).

Three categories emerged from the participants' responses to the second interview question (volunteering to help with the kindergarten trips) as factors enhancing parent volunteering – adult/child ratio (24%), benefit for the child (16%), and safety of the child (8%).

Many parents were aware of the legal requirement of the minimum adult/child ratio for an outing and perceived this to be a main enhancer to volunteering to help with the kindergarten trips, as one parent elaborated, *'There is 1 to 3 ratio and one parent having three children if they are four year boys is pretty hard work, so definitely if there were more parents it would be easier for the adults to have maybe only one or two children they have to keep an eye on'* (298). Some parents articulated the benefits for the child, for example, one parent remarked, *'It's important for children to get out into the wider community and experience all those sorts*

of things' (136). Another benefit was related to the child's emotional wellbeing, as a parent recounted: *'My child is quite a shy and quiet child, and I wanted to be there for the very first trip he went on, because for me it's important for him to feel secure and safe in the surroundings'* (890). Two parents volunteered to ensure the child's safety, as one of them recalled, *'Trust really I go on kindergarten trips either me or Paul because I want to be there for the safety aspect really, not that I don't trust them, I just want to see it'* (298).

Three categories emerged from the participants' responses to the third interview question (volunteering to help with the fundraising activities) as factors enhancing parent volunteering—justification of fundraising (80%), various types of fundraising (72%), and being on the parent committee (40%).

The majority of parents volunteered since they believed that fundraising at the kindergarten was justifiable - kindergarten parents paid low fees and the raised money was well spent. One parent manifested, *'I think we should, if it was a fee-paying kindy where you pay high fees, then you pay for the service, but this kindy is a public kindy which is government funded, there is always never enough money for what they do'* (112). Another parent expressed the similar justification, *'It's part of your responsibility to help with fundraising or else you have to accept you need to pay more fees'* (884). A third parent maintained, *'It's about to keep the costs down for parents'* (163). Parent 152 provided an illuminative remark:

'I think it's a big part, because we pay such a small amount of money, I feel it's a very small amount of money for our child to be there, five days a week. It's an absolute god-send. I think it's really important, small but a very important part parents can do to help teachers, to get better resources, so they can make crowns with foil and things stuck on it.'

Raised money being well spent was also important justification, as a parent explained, *'They do a good job with the money they got, so any extra help, and they always tell you where they spent the money, like it's not just into a hole and never see it, they will say we bought such and such equipment with the money you raised'* (112). Various types of fundraising allowed parents to find a way to contribute that suited their situation, as a parent outlined, *"We have a lot of fun with our fundraising so we have a lot of family things, we do family discos, picnics, barbecues and things like that, as fundraising activities, and also they introduced buying things through catalogues, calendars, we do tea towels all of those sort of*

things" (136). Another parent exemplified the flexibility of the fundraising, *"For raffle tickets, for example, each parent is expected to sell a certain number, and something very attainable, very easy, and they just encourage you to give your time really"* (300). A significant proportion of the participants were on a parent committee, and unsurprisingly, being on the parent committee was reported to be an enhancer to volunteering, as a parent stated, *"A large reason is because of my role of chairperson of the committee, and that is primarily what we do as a group, is to fundraise"* (117).

Impediments to volunteering to help

Three categories emerged from the participants' responses to the three interview questions respectively as factors impeding parent volunteering—limited time (48%), looking after a younger child (28%), and school commitment (8%). Almost half of the parents considered lack of time to be a factor that impeded volunteering to help at the kindergarten session, as a parent put it, *"That's really a time factor because I...two of the sessions I'm working right through that day"* (154). Quite a few parents found it was difficult to volunteer to help with the trips since they had a younger child at home to take care of, as a parent explained, *'I'd love to go more often, but the younger, they often say unfortunately you can't take younger kids because it's too hard, just try to look after your own toddler as well as a group of children is just a little bit impossible'* (300). Two parents found it was hard to contribute to the kindergarten fundraising since at the same time they had to contribute to the school fundraising for their older children, as a parent revealed, *"Sometimes it gets a lot, especially with my daughter at school when you've got more than one child, there is all the fundraising for her school as well, and it can be a really big strain on the family"* (112).

Tension and mediation

Two categories emerged from the participants' responses to the three interview questions as tensions in the practice of parent volunteering – relying on core parents (20%) and limited financial resource (20%). Several parents mentioned that teachers sometimes struggled to get enough parent helpers, as a parent noted, *'Sometimes it's just the same parents over and over*

because of their commitment to doing it, they are always trying to get new parents involved' (108). Another parent portrayed, *'Sometimes it is hard to get volunteers...things like washing roster they struggle for... often there isn't a parent helper, even though you know there is a roster up for the whole of the term, often there is only two or three names over the whole term'* (400). Limited financial resource was also identified as a source of tension, as a parent commented: *'With the way the world is at the moment, money is still coming back up, so it's quite hard for parents too'* (108).

Three categories emerged from the participants' responses to the three interview questions as parents' approaches to mediating the tensions - an 'I should' approach (16%), a 'no self-burdening' approach (16%), and a 'time for money' approach (8%). The 'I should' approach addressed the tension of insufficient volunteers, as a parent acknowledged, *'I feel I should volunteer, because no one else is, so I want to contribute from that point of view'* (400). The 'no self-burdening' approach addressed the tension of limited financial resource in fundraising, as a parent suggested, *'I think as long as you have the attitude I give what I can, and not overburden yourself or worry that you can't give heaps of money, I think it's the attitude, just give what you can'* (112). The 'time for money' approach also addressed the tension of limited financial resource, as a parent enunciated, *'I know a lot of parents, they get a little bit sick of always handing the money out, but you don't have to always hand the money out, you just put your time in'* (300).

Discussion and implications

Among all categories of the three themes as presented above, several categories are particularly important and beg further discussion. The category *various types of volunteering* as an enhancer of parent volunteering pertains precisely to the practical question raised at the end of the introduction section of this article: What volunteer opportunities, if any, should practitioners never utilize? According to the category, volunteering to help at the kindergarten sessions took a range of forms, from reading for a group of children, helping with messy table work, cutting up the food and the fruit, to cleaning the food plates and the kitchen. It is remarkable that the parents perceived volunteering to help with the 'routine tasks' such as

cleaning and washing to be beneficial for the children, which supports Scully et al.'s (2015) stance that even routine or labour work such as 'sewing smocks' and 'cutting out items' can lead the way to teacher-parent partnership, and calls in question the view of some academics (Briggs & Potter, 1999; Hendrick & Weissman, 2011; Arthur et al., 2015) that asking parents to do routine tasks or labour work such as cutting fruits or cleaning is either 'demeaning' or 'meaningless and ineffectual' for partnership building. Given the practically entangling relationship between parental involvement and teacher-parent partnership (as previously described), and parents' perception of and belief about the benefits of asking parents to do the 'routine tasks' in an early childhood setting, there seems to be no strict boundary between meaningful tasks and meaningless tasks in an early childhood setting. The parents were aware that 'there is so much that can be done in the kindergarten' (277), and realistically the 'routine tasks' constitute a substantial proportion of what 'can be done' by the parents. Due to its dual purposes (education and care) of an early childhood setting, all tasks (simple or complex) accomplished can be beneficial for the children. Therefore, in practice, as long as the teachers bear in mind an educational purpose, there is nothing wrong with them inviting parents to do routine tasks (usually labouring jobs) which are seemingly simple and non-educational. On one hand, teachers should adhere to the right practices upon reflection rather than blindly accept whatever is articulated in the dominant discourse (e.g., the undesirability of 'routine tasks'); On the other hand, teachers should be more intentional about realizing the potential benefits of parent volunteering that involves routine tasks.

The category *adult/child ratio* as another enhancer of parent volunteering actually mirrors an impediment to parent volunteering. Meeting legally required adult/child ratio is paramount in all aspects of the teachers' work when taking the children on an excursion. Given the importance of going on trips for young children (Taylor, Morris, & Cordeau-Young, 1997) and the fact that the adult/child ratio in any early childhood setting can never be high enough for taking all children out of the centre, inviting parent volunteers becomes essential. Therefore, it seems necessary that all early childhood centres make the trips and excursions accessible to parents. However, some privately owned early childhood provisions are reluctant to bring parents on board for taking children on a trip because the teachers do not want to 'burden' the parents who pay fees and leave their child with the teachers (Education Review Office, 2015). This mentality reflects the influence of the neoliberal ideologies (e.g.,

consumerism and competition) on people's perception of the legitimacy and importance of parental involvement in early childhood education (Nairn & Higgins, 2007). While the consumerism mentality is a derivative of our modern society, teachers should not allow it to overwrite the early childhood education philosophies.

The category *justification of fundraising* as an enhancer of parent volunteering is in stark contrast to the neoliberal discourses in early childhood education that 'positioned education as a private good that should be paid for by the individual and asserted that choice and competition was the way to ensure efficiency and the maximum use of resources' (Duncan, 2007, p. 321). Due to the prevalence of neoliberal ideologies, the legitimacy of the kindergartens' reliance on government funding and fundraising faces challenges. Parents in this study justified fundraising by pointing out that kindergarten parents paid low fees and that the raised money was well spent. The parents believed that fundraising was a perfectly acceptable practice for kindergartens that aimed for high quality education. This belief resonates with the kindergartens' fundraising policy statements (Auckland Kindergarten Association, 2015). Research has shown that fundraising can also be immediately beneficial for the children, for example, it helps develop preschoolers' entrepreneurial skills (Tauriņa & Stangaine, 2010). Fundraising should not be seen as exclusive to only certain types of early childhood provisions such as kindergartens and play centres, rather, with good reasons and careful planning, any type of early childhood provisions may include fundraising in its repertoire of educational experiences for the children.

The category *relying on core parents* as a tension in practice is thought-provoking. In the early stage of the Free Kindergarten movement, the kindergartens tended to rely on the contribution of the few people whose 'role can be seen as that of lady bountiful' (Hughes, 1989, p. 39), which is philanthropic in nature and incomparable to the tension existing in today's kindergartens. The few 'same parents over and over because of their commitment to doing it' (108) in this study were not always wealthy or 'bountiful', on the contrary, they were often parents who had financial difficulty and chose to sacrifice their time instead. Therefore, while dependence on 'core parents' is a convenient way to 'get things done'; it might involve an equity issue. First, regardless of the sincere willingness to help of the few parents, the teachers' overly use of their time, energy, or skills might amount to exploitation. Second, dependence on the few parents' contribution might result in teachers inadvertently

compromising their effort to create involvement opportunities for other parents. Third, as Christianakis (2011) argued, overuse of some exceptionally involved parents might 'set up unreasonable expectations for parents with limited access to financial and familial resources' (p. 173). To overcome the problem of small numbers and increase the numbers of parent volunteers, more encouragement and invitations from the teachers, rather than the opposite, are needed. This is largely a matter of reaching out to all parents.

As Duncan (2007) observed, in New Zealand, 'early childhood care and education services, with their dual function of providing education and care for children, and supporting parents' participation in employment, are distinctively positioned within neoliberal discourses' (p. 321). With the prevailing neoliberal context, some parents hold the belief that 'I pay and you do the jobs', treat the setting as a 'drop-off centre', and are not disposed to get involved. I would argue, however, that the setting should not concur or reinforce the belief by not inviting parents to volunteer to help. Although traditional definitions of parental involvement are related to parents' investment of time and money (Bower & Griffin, 2011), parental involvement should not be misinterpreted as merely 'helping' in the under-resourced centres (Christianakis, 2011) or as only beneficial to an early childhood centre that is under-funded (MacNaughton, 2003). As a traditional type of parental involvement (Epstein, 1995, 2010) and a tool for establishing teacher-parent partnership (Scully et al., 2015), the educational value of parent volunteering should be well recognized and effectively communicated to the parents.

Limitations and future direction

There are limitations to this study. First, given the native English language status of all participants in this study and the linguistic and cultural diversity of the New Zealand society, the transferability of the findings are limited. Second, a substantial proportion of participants in this study was the parents with relatively high socioeconomic status (SES), for example, while the national mean gross household income at the time of survey (2009) was \$91,900 (Ministry of Social Development, 2014), 40% of the participants' household income exceeded \$100,000. The high SES might have contributed to the general positive attitude of the

participants toward volunteering to help given the possible link between SES and parental involvement (Zellman & Perlman, 2006; Laforett & Mendez, 2010). A third limitation relates to the possible volunteer bias (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1976) as a result of the volunteer participants in this study, that is, this study might have oversampled parents who were more inclined to volunteer to help at the kindergarten. The second and third limitations are related in that they are both due to the voluntary response sample. To address these limitations, future research should include non-native English speaking parents. Also, the voluntary response sampling method used in this study should be replaced to avoid volunteer bias. For example, We may consider inviting the parents who are representative of different patterns in volunteering to help to an interview rather than simply interview those who like to be interviewed. Further, an advanced stage of research on the topic should involve other types of early childhood provisions in addition to the kindergartens.

Conclusion

The study was triggered by the discrepancy between academics in their evaluation of certain types of parent volunteering to help in the context of early childhood education, specifically, it was aimed at finding out, through the lens of parents, whether there exist certain types of parent volunteering to help that are inherently meaningless (in any sense), ineffectual, or undesirable (e.g., demeaning). The study revealed the parents' perceptions of several facets of parent volunteering to help including enhancers, impediments, and tensions and mediation. The parents reported a number of enhancers of volunteering to help, with a predominant enhancer being *various types of volunteering* and their perceived benefits for the child. The parents affirmed that the child benefited from parents' volunteering to do the simple tasks or labour work such as cleaning and washing, which is remarkable. The simple, routine, and labour tasks were highly valued by the parents in this study, and, according to the parents, these tasks were popular in the kindergartens. Regardless of the factuality or truthfulness of such parental perceptions which is beyond the scope of the study, it is apparently problematic to problematise certain types of parent volunteering to help simply because they do not appear to directly relate to teaching or learning, particularly in an early

childhood education setting where there is no boundary between teaching and support, learning and play, or education and care. Also, the parents perceived fundraising to be beneficial and justifiable, which runs counter to the currently prevailing neoliberal ideologies. Further, the parents identified some tensions in recruitment of parent volunteers and shared their approaches to mediating the tensions. To sum up, the parents generally had positive experiences with and affirming attitude toward volunteering to help at the kindergarten, which implies that, to a certain extent, parent volunteering to help is feasible and functional practice and should continue to be practiced and promoted in early childhood education settings.

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