

# DEVELOPING AN ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR DETERMINING TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PREPAREDNESS FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN EXPERIENCING PARENTAL SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

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## Abstract

This paper documents the development of an online qualitative questionnaire to be used with teachers of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The questionnaire forms the first phase one of a larger project where it will be used to determine teachers' thoughts, opinion, and beliefs regarding their preparedness for working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Development and structure of the questionnaire has been informed by a previous study whereby teachers disclosed their professional learning needs for working with children and families experiencing parental separation and divorce. The modules in the questionnaire reflect the modules in the online professional learning tool. The categories of teachers' professional learning needs are—(1) knowledge of the phenomenon, (2) working with children, and (3) working with families. Usefulness of the questionnaire was determined using Brookfield's theory of the critically reflective practitioner. I reflected on my own experiences, sought feedback from colleagues who trialed the questionnaire, and made comparisons with the literature. These data were synthesized to conclude the usefulness of the questionnaire to determine teachers' perception of their preparedness for working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

## Keywords

Questionnaire, teachers, separation, divorce, early years

## Introduction

This paper documents the development and tests the usefulness and fit of an online questionnaire to determine teachers' perception of their preparedness for working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. A questionnaire is a document containing questions and other items designed to elicit data appropriate for analysis (Babbie, 2013). Questionnaires are useful instruments in studies where descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory data is sought from individuals (Babbie, 2013). The questionnaire described in this paper will be used to determine or draw together the major dimensions of thought, opinion, and beliefs of Australian classroom teachers who work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce on a daily basis. It has been designed to be administered prior to and repeated after teachers have completed an online professional learning module that is focused on the phenomenon of parental separation and divorce and how to work with young children and their families. The content for the online professional learning module and consequently the pre-

and post- questionnaire has been informed by a previous study identifying teachers' learning needs in this field (Mahony, under review) and the research literature relating to this phenomenon and how to work with children and their parents.

Parental separation and divorce affect a large proportion of young children. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014) estimated that in the 12-month period between mid2012 to mid-2013, one-in-five children (21%) under the age of 18 years had a biological parent living elsewhere, which amounts to just over one million Australian children. The development and delivery of this questionnaire and online professional learning module is important because for some children parental separation and divorce may negatively impact their emotional and social wellbeing (Babalís, Xanthakou, Papa, & Tsolou, 2011; Cheng, Dunn, O'Connor, & Golding, 2006; Potter, 2010; Storksen, Thorsen, Overland, & Brown, 2012; Strohschein, 2005), and academic outcomes (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Steele, Sigle-Rushton, & Kravdal, 2009; Sun & Li, 2011). Some claim that parental stress factors such as parental absence, compromised parenting, economic disadvantage, and parental conflict may have greater impact on young children than the actual event of their parents' separation and divorce (Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000). Yet, other children do not seem to experience adverse effects as a result of their parents' separation and divorce (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997; Moxnes, 2003; Winslow, Wolchik, Sander, 2004). This has implications for classroom teachers who, apart from parents, see children for a greater proportion of time each day than any other person. Teachers are in an ideal position to provide support when needed to promote children's emotional, academic, and social wellbeing (Kelly, 2000); however, teachers have reported an absence of formal knowledge, and there is a paucity of research literature to inform teachers in their daily work with these children and their parents.

While there is much literature informing the design of quantitative surveys and questionnaires, there is sparse literature informing the development of qualitative online questionnaires. In particular, there are no known questionnaires designed to determine individual teachers' specific knowledge, thoughts, and practices with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

To develop this online questionnaire, the existing literature informing the development of

qualitative questionnaires has been reviewed. The content of the questions and statements in the questionnaire have been informed by research literature informing teachers' professional learning needs in this field, and literature about the phenomenon of parental separation and divorce, the effects on young children and their families, and how to work with them. The questions and statements included in the questionnaire have been trialed with experienced teachers and colleagues who have also been teachers of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

### **Questionnaire design**

First, justification for a qualitative online questionnaire will be provided. Then the literature informing the construction of questionnaires and formulating questions and statements is reviewed. A detailed explanation of the rationale for each item on the questionnaire is given.

### **Qualitative questionnaire**

The questionnaire described in this paper is a qualitative questionnaire. The research problem should determine the method of data collection used in a research study (Berg, 2004; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2002). Qualitative studies aim to explore the experiences of people to understand how they make sense of everyday life experiences (Hatch, 2002). The questionnaire designed for use in this study is open-ended rather than structured. The proposed study where this questionnaire will be used requires a subjective, open-ended and interpretive approach that qualitative studies offer (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) in order to capture the detail of classroom teachers' thoughts, opinions, and beliefs when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Open-ended questionnaires are used in qualitative studies such as this project (Babbie, 2013). In contrast, a quantitative approach would rely on numerical data to answer a narrower research question as objectively as possible (Cresswell, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004).

### **Online questionnaire**

There are a number of types of questionnaires that could have been used for a research study. These include paper, mailed out, and online questionnaires. An online questionnaire has been constructed as the professional learning experience will be in the form of an online learning module. The questionnaire will be built into this module to be completed before the teacher begins the learning

module and again on completion. An online mode will enable teachers to complete the questionnaire and undertake the learning at a convenient time for them. Presentation of the questionnaire and professional learning module online will not restrict teachers who are unable to attend face-to-face presentations; rather an online mode will be far-reaching and enable teachers from broader demographic areas to participate. Online mode of delivery is cost effective as there is no expense printing and mailing questionnaires.

### Construction of the questionnaire

The goal is to have participants continue until the questionnaire is completed and for the researcher to gather meaningful rich data. When designing a questionnaire that is user-friendly and extracts the desired data, consideration needs to be given to the layout, order of items, instructions for participants, time needed to complete the questionnaire, and the types and content of questions to be included. The complete questionnaire in the order in which items will be presented online, and with instructions for participants is included in the appendix in paper form.

Items in the questionnaire need to be spread out and uncluttered. A clear format is particularly important to make it easy for teachers who will self-administer the questionnaire (Babbie, 2013) such as online surveys. An uncluttered layout will contribute to participants persisting with completing the questionnaire and responding to the items fully.

The order of items in a questionnaire can influence the responses given. The items in this questionnaire were grouped rather than randomized. This enables participants to maintain focus rather than continually switching their attention from one topic to another (Babbie, 2013). These themes included items designed to elicit teachers' knowledge about the phenomenon and how they work with young children and their families experiencing parental separation and divorce. The themes have been informed by previous research of teachers' professional learning needs (Mahony, under review) whereby 21 teachers were interviewed about their learning needs regarding their work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Other themes regarding content were extracted from the research literature. Broad data relating to the phenomenon and teachers' perceived effects of parental separation or divorce is requested first, followed by more focused questions relating to teachers' work with children and their families. Demographic data is placed at the end of a self-administered

questionnaire as this is not as interesting for participants. Placing demographic data at the end ensures the main part of the questionnaire is completed fully, minimizing the risk of the participants becoming fatigued and not answering some questions in detail (Babbie, 2013).

As this questionnaire is to be self-administered, clear basic instructions for completing it are included at the beginning of the questionnaire and throughout each of the themed sections. Each themed subsection is introduced with a short statement concerning its content and purpose to help the participants make sense of the questionnaire and for it to seem less chaotic, particularly as this questionnaire asks about a number of different topics. Participants are told exactly what is required, that they are to indicate answers to particular questions by checking the circle beside the appropriate answer or by entering their answer when asked to do so. Guidelines about the length of the written responses are provided. For some closed-ended questions, participants were invited to elaborate on their responses.

Designing useful (and trustworthy) questionnaires begins with formulating good questions and statements (Babbie, 2013). Questions and statements were written in plain language, contained one topic only, negative statements were avoided so as not to confuse participants, and items were relevant to the project and participants (Babbie, 2013). Items were designed so that teachers were able to read them quickly, understand them, and provide an answer quickly without difficulty as participants are unlikely to study an item to be sure they understand it before answering (Babbie, 2013). The selection and design of items was important to ensure the desired data was elicited in as short a time-frame as possible to enable the questionnaire to be completed within minutes (Babbie, 2013) to avoid fatigue and eliminate the possibility of the participant not answering questions fully or not finishing the questionnaire.

Questions were open-ended in which case teachers provided their own answers to the question. Space was provided on the online questionnaire for teachers to enter their response. This type of questioning elicits in-depth, qualitative data. In contrast, closed-ended questions require the participant to select an answer from a pre-prepared group of responses. This type of questioning may not elicit in-depth personalized data that open-ended questions may elicit. Closed-ended questions may omit certain issues that participants may have said that were important. This is important for this

study as teachers' individualized responses regarding their work with children and families experiencing parental separation and divorce were required.

The questionnaire described in this paper has been designed to be used pre- and post a professional learning module regarding teachers' work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce to determine their perceptions of their preparedness for working with these children. The content of the questionnaire (and professional learning module) has been informed by the relevant literature that documents the professional learning needs of teachers in this field. While there is much literature documenting the effects of parental separation on young children and their families, there is a paucity of research conducted to inform teachers work with these young children. However, there are a few studies conducted with teachers that have relevance to this paper. Ellington (2003) administered questionnaires to eight teachers of young children. The questionnaires were focused on finding out about teachers' knowledge of particular children's family circumstance, and more generally teachers' perception of the effect of parental separation and divorce, communication with parents, and strategies to use with children. Luk-Fong (2011) used teacher narratives of 30 primary school teachers from Hong Kong to investigate their perceptions of children's experiences. King (2007) conducted focus groups and one-on-one interviews with two Canadian teachers to examine how teachers can promote learning of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. King (2007) found that one of the two Canadian teachers had investigated the effects of parental separation and divorce on young children through professional reading to gain an insight into the phenomenon. Cottongim (2002) conducted in-depth interviews with 20 parents, classroom teachers, and eight school counselors to determine the source of teachers' knowledge, if teachers had received specific training, interventions, and their perceived role as a support for children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Each of these studies identified the need for teacher professional development to inform their work with these young children and their families.

Mahony (under review) conducted an interview study with 19 Australian teachers who work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. She found that teachers wanted to know about the phenomenon of parental separation and divorce and how to work with young children and their families. These identified professional learning needs have informed the categories and

content for inclusion in the questionnaire described in this paper.

These prior studies, although small-scale doctoral and masters projects are useful to confirm the need for teacher professional learning in this field. The interview protocols and questionnaires from these previous studies have been reviewed. However, the questionnaire and interview questions from these previous studies are not suitable for this current study in their entirety. The questions used in the previous studies elicited more general data gathered. As this current project has followed on from a previous study that identified teachers' pedagogical practices with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce (Mahony, 2013), and a further project identifying the professional learning needs of teachers for working with these children (Mahony, under review), the project that this questionnaire is being designed for has become more focused on teachers professional learning, therefore, more specific and individualized data is needed.

The sections of the questionnaire have been framed according to the categories identified as the professional learning needs of teachers—knowledge of the phenomenon, working with children, and working with parents (Mahony, under review). A fourth section to gather demographic data was included. The entire questionnaire is included in the appendix, albeit in paper form. The development of the items in each of these sections will now be explained.

### *Section 1: Knowledge of the phenomenon*

The first section focuses on teachers' knowledge of the phenomenon. In particular, this set of questions explores teachers' understanding of the circumstances prior, during, and following a couple's separation and divorce. Teachers are asked to enter a short response to the first three questions and answer yes or no to the fourth question. Participants may be asked to elaborate on their response to question 1d.

1a. What do you believe to be the circumstances **that may lead** to a couples separation and/or divorce?

1b. What are some of the challenges families experience **during** the process of separation and divorce that you are aware of?

1c. What are some of the challenges families experience **following** the process of separation and divorce that you are aware of?

A fourth question in this section was designed to determine if teachers' actions were influenced by their knowledge of parental separation or divorce. Teachers are asked to respond yes or no.

1d. Does having knowledge of the challenges of particular families have on how you interact with these children and their families?       Yes    No

If participants responded 'no', the online program will take them to section 2. If participants responded 'yes' they are invited to elaborate on their response by entering a short response.

### *Section 2: Working with children*

Questions in section 2, *working with children*, were designed to elicit individual responses about how teachers speak and interact with children. Questions in this section also probe teachers' knowledge of support personnel and services available to assist with constructing support for these young children and their families.

In the first question, teachers are asked to read the vignette of an episode described by a teacher in a prior study and respond to the questions.

Joel has spent time with dad...he [dad] always wanted to spend time with this little boy and his older sister. But...he now has another partner and they have another child and another child on the way. So...the telephone calls and the visits where dad spent the time with his children from his first marriage have...taken a turn and he doesn't devote the same amount of time to Joel and his sister. Joel seems to go through a lot of anguish...Just this week...he was absolutely disagreeable...and mum said he's had a week with dad. Joel was saying things like I'm angry. I'm always making mistakes (Mahony, 2013, p. 219).

2a. Please describe how you would speak and interact with Joel if he was a child in your class. Enter a

short response.

Question 2b focuses specifically on teachers' speaking with children.

2b. Which of the following would you say to Joel or another child? Please check the circle. You may check more than one circle.

- What's wrong? (Mahony, 2013)
- When you share a problem, sometimes it helps (Mahony, 2013)
- I wouldn't say anything as it's not my job to speak to children regarding their family circumstance.
- I want to say something to reassure the child, but I don't know what to say.

The following questions focus on teachers' awareness of parental stress factors resulting from separation and divorce, and ask teachers to respond to how they would react in these situations. These questions have been informed by participating teachers in a previous study (Mahony, 2013).

Participating teachers are asked to write a brief explanation of what they would do for each of these scenarios involving children whose parents are separated or divorced.

2c. One child in your class whose parents have recently separated usually always has their homework completed and signed by a parent. However, you notice that it has not been completed for the past few weeks. What explanation can you give for this? What would you do?

2d. A child in your class has come to school and has not had breakfast or hasn't brought lunch to school? What explanation can you give for this? What would you do?

The following question is designed to elicit teachers' knowledge of support personnel and services available to them:

2e. Are you aware of any school or community personnel, services or programs that are offered for children to support them in a crisis? Have you ever used any of these? Was this helpful (Adapted from King, 2007)?

### *Section 3: Working with parents*

The following two questions focus on teachers' interactions with parents experiencing parental separation and divorce. Participants are asked to enter a short response to the scenario presented in item 3a, and check the circle/circles or enter their own response to item 3b.

3a. A child's mother who has recently become a single parent comes into the classroom frequently upset? What would you say/do?

3b. You have sent a note home to a parent requesting an interview to discuss their child's inappropriate behaviour at school. On receiving this request from the teacher, the child's parent arrived at school displaying aggressive behaviour towards the teacher and the child (Mahony, 2013). Check the circle/circles that describe your action. You may check more than one box and/or you may write your own response.

- I will never send home a note to these parents again.
- Call the administration team to have the parent removed from the school.
- Speak calmly to the parent.
- Other (please enter you own response)

### *Section 4: Demographic information*

Finally, demographic information is gathered in the questionnaire. Participants are asked to enter details such as gender, age, years teaching, their highest degree, and marital status as this type of demographic data may provide insight into particular teacher's responses in the questionnaire.

Participants are also free not to answer some questions if they are not comfortable to do so.

### **Usefulness and fit of the questionnaire**

Brookfield's (1995) theory of the critically reflective practitioner provided the theoretical structure that has informed data collection and analysis to test the usefulness and fit of the questionnaire. To determine the usefulness and fit of the questionnaire I drew on data collected using three of four lenses described by Brookfield (1995)—(a) our experiences, (b) our colleagues' experiences, and (c) theoretical literature. The fourth lens, our students' eyes, is not relevant to this paper as there are no

students involved in this project.

Drawing on our experiences describes my experiences of being a teacher of young children who have experienced parental separation and divorce. Brookfield (1995) suggests that personal experience is an important source of knowledge. When designing this questionnaire, drawing on the reflections of my teaching experience has enabled me to have insight into the experiences of participants and the usefulness and fit of items in this questionnaire.

The questionnaire was pretested with colleagues. Colleagues who were previously teachers of young children were invited to participate in a trial of the online questionnaire. Colleagues can offer critical comment and provide another perspective. They have a different set of personal and professional experiences to draw on. Conversations with peers help us to see a different perspective as well as commonalities. The pretest involved gathering colleagues' comments about the questionnaire itself. Colleagues confirmed questionnaire items were clear and unambiguous.

Theoretical literatures are formal sources of knowledge to help understand and provide a framework. They can provide confirmation that the items in the questionnaire are reliable and grounded in theory. Feedback from colleagues was synthesized and compared with the research literature and my own experiences as a teacher of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce to confirm the usefulness and fit of the questionnaire.

## **Conclusion**

The development and testing of an online qualitative questionnaire to determine teacher' perceptions about their preparedness for working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce has been detailed in this paper. The development, framing, and content of the questionnaire was informed by the research literature. Trialing of the questionnaire and reflecting on my own experiences confirmed the usefulness and fit of the questionnaire. The questionnaire will be embedded in the professional learning module and trialed with practicing teachers.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire to explore teachers' perceptions of their work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! Please complete the survey below before beginning the learning module.

Please note that the information collected in this questionnaire is completely confidential and will only be used to determine the effectiveness of the learning module related to teachers' work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

This questionnaire has four sections and will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete.

Some items require you to write a short response of one to two sentences. Other items ask you to answer yes or no, and in some instances you may be prompted to elaborate on your answer.

You may choose not to answer any question and proceed to the next question at any time.

#### Section 1: Knowledge of the phenomenon

In this section, I am interested in what you know about separation and divorce in general. There are four items in this section. Please enter a short response to questions 1a, 1b, and 1c.

1a. What do you believe to be the circumstances **that may lead** to a couples separation and/or divorce?

1b. What are some of the challenges families experience **during** the process of separation and divorce that you are aware of?

1c. What are some of the challenges families experience **following** the process of separation and divorce that you are aware of?

1d. Does having knowledge of the challenges of particular families have on how you interact with these children and their families? Please click the appropriate circle.  Yes  No

If no – proceed to section 2

If yes – Please elaborate on how knowledge of the challenges of particular families has on your interactions with these children and their families.

#### Section 2: Working with children

In this section, I want to know how you work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. There are five items in this section.

Please read this vignette and respond to the questions:

Joel has spent time with dad...he [dad] always wanted to spend time with this little boy and his older sister. But...he now has another partner and they have another child and another child on the way. So...the telephone calls and the visits where dad spent the time with his children from his first marriage have...taken a turn and he doesn't devote the same amount of time to Joel and his sister. Joel seems to go through a lot of anguish...Just this week...he was absolutely disagreeable...and mum said he's had a week with dad. Joel was saying things like I'm angry. I'm always making mistakes (Mahony, 2013, p. 219).

2a. Please describe how you would speak and interact with Joel if he was a child in your class. Enter a short response.

2b. Which of the following would you say to Joel or another child? Please check the circle. You may check more than one circle.

- What's wrong? (Mahony, 2013)
- When you share a problem, sometimes it helps (Mahony, 2013)
- I wouldn't say anything as it's not my job to speak to children regarding their family circumstance.
- I want to say something to reassure the child, but I don't know what to say.

In the next two items, you are presented with three scenarios. Please enter a short response to the questions.

2c. One child in your class whose parents have recently separated usually always has their homework completed and signed by a parent. However, you notice that it has not been completed for the past few weeks. What explanation can you give for this? What would you do?

2d. A child in your class has come to school and has not had breakfast or hasn't brought lunch to school? What explanation can you give for this? What would you do?

The final question in this section is about support personnel and services for children and families experiencing parental separation and divorce. Please enter a short response to this item.

2e. Are you aware of any school or community personnel, services or programs that are offered for children and their families to support them in a crisis? Have you ever used any of these? Was this helpful? (Adapted from King, 2007).

### **Section 3: Working with parents**

The following two questions focus on your interactions with parents who are experiencing parental separation and divorce.

3a. Please read the scenario and enter your response.

A child's mother who has recently become a single parent comes into the classroom frequently upset? What would you say/do? Please enter a short response.

3b. Please read the scenario and check the circle/circles that describe what you might do in this instance. You may check more than one circle and/or you may enter your own response.

You have sent a note home to a parent requesting an interview to discuss their child's inappropriate behaviour at school. On receiving this request from the teacher, the child's parent arrived at school displaying aggressive behaviour towards the teacher and the child (Mahony, 2013).

- I will never send home a note to these parents again.
- Call the administration team to have the parent removed from the school.
- Speak calmly to the parent.
- Other (please enter you own response)

**Section 4: Demographic information:**

Please check the circle or write a short response to answer the following demographic information. You may choose not to answer some questions.

4a. My gender is      female      male

4b. My age is:      23-30      31-40      41-50      50+

4c. How long have you been teaching? \_\_years \_\_months

4d. What is your highest degree? (Cottongim, 2002)

4e. Marital status

- Married
- Defacto
- Divorced
- Separated
- Never married
- Other

Thank you for completing this questionnaire! Your time and participation are very much appreciated, and will contribute to a growing knowledge base on teachers' work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.