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Active adult participation in early childhood education: Enhancing child learning and community wellness

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Introduction

In our qualitative research project (2010–2012), the team investigated how “ordinary” early childhood centres enacted “extraordinary” pedagogy by including families, wider whānau and communities in the “everyday” of early childhood programmes; that is, within this project, we explored both theoretical constructs and teaching and organisational strategies to increase parent participation and positive learning outcomes for children and community wellness. Our primary research question was:

How does active adult participation in early childhood education enhance positive outcomes for children and their whānau?

Our research included all four teaching teams, parent facilitators, and the management of the four early childhood centres, the 303 Parenting Resource Centre (hereafter referred to as 303), and the management and administrators at the Whanganui Central Baptist Kindergarten and Early Learning Centres (hereafter referred to as CBK). Judith Duncan and Sarah Te One¹ worked alongside the CBK teams as researcher leaders over the two years of the project.

Adult participation included families, whānau and, where appropriate, communities. Our research has led us to reconceptualise the roles “people, places and things”. The most significant change was to embed CBK early childhood education services within the wider community, in contrast to the traditional approach to an early childhood education centre sited within a community but distinct, and sometimes isolated, from the wider community.

Key findings

Three main themes emerged from this project:

1. To build and maintain active adult participation required CBK staff to strengthen their interactions with whānau and community to intentionally transform participation.
This strengthening of interactions flowed from the everyday pedagogical decisions and actions of the teachers, through to the administration and organisation of CBK, and included the parent facilitators at 303. All at CBK reframed their everyday work (e.g., centre layout to draw parents in, and intentional interactions with parents) to actively engage in relationships with each family and whānau.
2. Active teacher, parent, whānau participation in the early childhood setting enhanced positive outcomes for children, their whānau and their community.
These positive outcomes were increased learning engagement for the children, confidence within and among the parents, and parent engagement in their children’s learning experiences at CBK.
3. Actively embedding the early childhood centres within the wider community supported community development and community wellness, and strengthened parenting.
Reframing our understanding of early childhood services as child-centred places to community-supported teaching and learning settings led to the design of focused and sustainable mechanisms to strengthen the work of teachers and the confidence of parents in parenting.

The more confident parents and whānau became through engagement in the centres with teachers and other parents, the more settled and socially confident their children were. Connecting parents with other parents encouraged the development of new friendships, both between parents and between children. Friendships increased the confidence of CBK whānau, and enhanced adults’ participation in centre activities. When parents shared their interests and activity passions with teachers and children in the centres it engaged their own and other children’s interests and learning. As parents understood more about their child’s learning, they

¹ Sarah Te One gathered data for this project in 2010, and has been involved in the ongoing development and thinking within the project.

participated more in early childhood education centre and 303 activities. Increased adult/whānau awareness of children's learning dispositions, both at CBK and at home, enhanced children's overall learning. The children's dispositional learning, tracked over time (2–3 years), demonstrated the effect of changed pedagogy on:

- consistent and sustained learning
- increasing competence in each child's favoured area of learning
- engagement in less favoured areas of learning.

Connections between the children's less favoured areas of learning at CBK, and their interests at home and in the community, improved their confidence and skills over all areas of their learning.

Embedding the early childhood centres within the wider community strengthened connections, networks, and relationships that enhanced supported children's learning outcomes and contributed to community wellness (see discussions below for examples).

The research

Four key theoretical concepts became lived language in CBK that shaped our thinking, methods, and understanding of outcomes:

Authentic relationships: An authentic partnership is one where each partner is genuinely and respectfully interested in the other, and intentionally and purposefully builds and maintains trusting relationship.

Sustainable relationships: These relationships are those that are **sustained** over time. The reason is so that parents will have links, connections and networks which they can call upon over a longer time period than only when their child/children are at the ECE service (that is, social capital).

Intentionality: The teachers were deliberate, thoughtful, and purposeful in interactions and support of parents with intended outcomes in mind. Being intentional increases effectiveness in teaching and learning (Duncan, 2011).

Embedding: The concept of embedding signals a shift in understanding of the relationship between early childhood centres and their communities. By saying CBK is 'embedded' in its community, we mean that it is visible in the wider community; involved in the activities, and plans of the wider community; playing a strategic role in the life of the wider community.

Sociocultural theories (Fleer & Richardson, 2004; Rogoff, 2012; Rogoff et al., 2007) influenced the framework for analysis for this project. Rogoff's metaphor of a prism provided constructs for interpreting and understanding our data. The faces of the prism allowed the researchers to re-examine data in different ways to ensure robust findings (see Rogoff, 2012).

Multiple data sources included audio and video observations that mapped adult movements; parent, child and teacher photo journaling; child case studies; individual and focus group interviews with social service workers, community-based service providers, children, families, whānau and teaching staff; CBK document analysis (learning stories, planning records); teacher conferencing; and parent surveys.

Major implications

1. Building and maintaining active adult participation

Learning traditions of CBK—sustainable participation

Revising CBK “learning traditions” to build and maintain adult participation involved all aspects of the early childhood education setting: teachers, parents, children, administration, management, and organisation. Teachers looked for daily opportunities to expand and extend their connections and conversations with the parents, and were rewarded with increased interest and participation by the parents in CBK services.

Seamless integration of services

Extending the services that had been offered through 303 to all the early childhood centres strengthened support and encouragement for parents. The daily pedagogy included a seamless integration of services with teachers, parents, and facilitators working **alongside** whānau to provide direct support or connections to someone else who could provide the support. Some examples of the new approaches follow: a parent facilitator moves between 303 and the early childhood centres to assist with connecting parents together as they drop off or collect their children, or when settling children; teachers undertake training on respectful and responsive listening so as to provide appropriate responses for families in all areas of their lives; a teacher from the infant centre works alongside a SPACE² programme facilitator to provide a bridge between parents; and a teacher joins in the weekly park gathering for parents. The reward is parents flow between 303³ and the early childhood education centres throughout the day.

This new learning tradition at CBK differs from a “hub” approach (Whalley, 2001, 2006) where professionals employed by other agencies work in the early childhood education environment.

Seeing and being seen

As teachers intentionally noticed and acknowledged parents in meaningful ways, the connections between parents and teachers, teachers and teachers, parents and parents increased. We made physical changes to the environment to increase the visibility of the adults, and enhance the opportunities for teachers and other parents to engage with each other through the day.

For example, we developed a tool to identify patterns of interactions within each of these spaces. Using this tool we were able to map the movements of adults around the environments to evaluate how the centre layout encourages (or inhibits) adult involvement with children, teachers, and other adults. For example:

1. Is the centre *family-friendly*? (i.e., is it easy, or not, to use?)
2. How welcoming is the centre?
3. Are there spaces for discussion? Spaces for privacy?
4. What (in the centre environment) affects the flow patterns?
5. Do we (as teachers) greet/acknowledge/interact with every adult who enters the centre? If not, why not? (For full details of this tool see Duncan et al., 2012.)

As a result of these reviews, we increased the intentionality of teachers’ gaze towards, and interaction with, parents throughout the day, as well as creating physical changes in the centres’ layouts to assist these processes (Duncan et al., 2012; Sailer & Penn, 2007). We discerned two shifts within the centres’ pedagogy: (a) teachers were “seeing” the parents as well as their children, and (b) the parents experienced “being seen”—being recognised and valued.

2 SPACE – Supporting Parents Alongside Children’s Education sessions.

3 The support offered by 303 is also an integrated service with parents from 303 working as facilitators, with parents supporting and sharing with other parents, and with regular community events as part of the programme engaging the wider community rather than only parents from CBK.

2. Enhanced positive outcomes for children and their whānau

Collaborative teacher–parent understanding of learning and teaching

Our question required an overview of active adult participation and its effect on children’s learning outcomes and community well-being. We used the metaphor of the “golden thread” (Lawrence, 2002) as a tool to gather the links (the thread) between children’s learning outcomes and involvement by adults in the 18 case studies of children’s learning. We found that active involvement of the parents, their wider whānau, and engagement with the wider community increased positive learning outcomes for the children. Working “alongside” parents and whānau, teachers were able to focus on family aspirations for meaningful learning outcomes for each child. Explicit connections to these aspirations were evident in teachers’ reports and conversations about learning with parents.

Before the research, the teachers shared learning stories and assessments as separate centre-teaching teams. We added *teacher conferencing*, in which we relooked at children’s learning outcomes across time and services. Discussions of and narrating extended stories of learning across time (not just snapshots) enabled the teachers to understand their role in the child’s learning as a collectivity. This collective approach expanded to teachers seeking parent involvement with them in the child’s learning. One approach taken was teachers and parents sharing photo stories together.

Teacher conferencing: All the teachers and other staff who had been involved with a child and his/her family since the child had enrolled shared brainstorming sessions of the remembered learning progressions and dispositions the child had demonstrated at different ages. This information may or may not have been captured in learning stories. The collage of learning for each child enabled us to track strengthened learning dispositions and outcomes across contexts and over time. Through this process, the adults gained a rich and holistic understanding of a “rich child” (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007).

Photo stories: Using digital cameras, the case study families were guided to take as many photos as they wished to share their lives with the teachers at their child’s centre. We provided little guidance over what to take, and trusted that the families and whānau would share only the images that they felt safe and wished to share. While several parents displayed surprise that the teachers were interested in their family’s lives, all the parents were delighted to share their images with the teachers. Once the cameras were returned to CBK, the teachers met with each family to talk about the photos that had been gathered—either in a printed form or on-screen if there were large numbers. These photos were understood as a photo story. Teachers described “rich” conversations that enhanced their pedagogical insights about children and families’ learning. Similarly, the parents found these shared discussions increased their understanding of the roles teachers can play in supporting their parenting.

3. Early childhood education embedded in community

Embedding CBK in the community provided us with the successful connections between the quality early childhood education and care and parent social support that CBK has been known for in Whanganui for many years, and explicit community development and wellness in the wider Whanganui community. We have deliberately used the term “embedded” in this project to provoke explicit engagement outside of the early childhood centres, an increased visibility by CBK within wider community events, activities and networks, and an acknowledgement of the role that CBK plays in the wider community. Our investigation of this aspect of “extraordinary” pedagogy demonstrated that this “embedding” will enable any early childhood education centre to contribute to community wellness and development in their own wider communities.

From “looking in” to “looking out”

Shifting from a child-centred approach to teaching and learning, teachers began to explore a community partnership approach. We asked: “What does a community partnership approach to teaching and learning look like?” and “How does this support community wellness?” We asked: “How can we involve our centres in the

community?” instead of the more usual question of “How can we involve the community in our centres?” This conceptual shift in approach was a cornerstone to the increased community participation that occurred over the two years of the project.

Building social capital among parents to build social capital among other parents

Making a difference for the parents, families and whānau, so they in turn made a difference for their children, involved **everyone** building links, networks and community connections. In this way social capital—the glue that holds communities together, the ingredient for resilient and successful families—was supported by all those involved at CBK (Duncan, 2009). These connections were nurtured through relationships between teachers and parents, and parents and parents who lived within and beyond CBK. For example, a mother, representing similar stories from parents, sketched how CBK worked in her life within the community. She discussed the links that connected her within and outside of CBK: from the ECE centres, to 303, to the local church, to meeting a mother in the supermarket, who she then connected with others at her church. These parents were then connected to CBK, and from there further networking continued. She concluded:

My family is in a much, much better situation now. I wouldn't have been able to do it on my own. I'd hate to think about what my life would have been like if I didn't come to CBK ... I wouldn't be who I am and feel proud of who I am today ... I just feel that 303 and CBK have contributed to that. It's been huge for me.

Her enthusiasm and lived examples demonstrated the role that CBK was making in the wider community and the effect this was having on individual families and the collective whānau in Whanganui.

Increased visibility of early childhood education enhanced CBK identity in the community

Children's learning outcomes were related to their family and whānau participation in CBK activities. These activities—both centre-based and community-based—supported families' sense of belonging, or connection to, their communities. As a result of increased awareness of community activities and events, CBK enhanced its own sense of identity as a contributing service with a unique place in the wider community.

Conclusion

Our research found that intentionally building a learning tradition that increases adult participation affects every aspect of a service—teaching and learning, administration, management and organisation. A multi-layered approach involves building and reframing relationships, reorganising provisions and spaces, and encouraging parent participation. This enables pedagogical practices that match the preferences and aspirations of families and whānau at **any** early childhood education service in ways relevant to each wider community.

Expanding everyday pedagogy to include working **alongside** parents and whānau to provide direct support or connections with the community necessitates a conceptual shift. This reconceptualisation challenges Aotearoa New Zealand's understanding of early childhood education as child-centred services to one that is positioned as a community and parenting resource alongside a learning environment for children. Intentionally refocusing on early childhood education so as to embed centres in their communities enables teachers and parents and children to build sustainable, deeper and more meaningful relationships that promote positive child learning outcomes and community wellness.

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