RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Beyond Instrumentalization in International Contexts of Diversity and Social Inequality

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First published 2023

ISBN: 978-0-367-41756-7 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-367-41758-1 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-0-367-81610-0 (ebk)

Chapter 1

PARENT-CENTRED PARTNERSHIPS

Early childhood educators addressing barriers to building reciprocal partnerships with parents

DOI: 10.4324/9780367816100-3

The funder for this chapter is Fay Hadley.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Fay Hadley and Elizabeth Rouse

Parent partnerships

Partnerships can be described as relationships in which the terms trust, reciprocity, mutuality and shared goals and decision-making are prevalent (Rouse, 2012; Rouse & Ware, 2017). These relationships are predicated on interactions in which there is shared power, responsiveness, reciprocity, positiveness and sensitivity (Hadley & Rouse, 2018), suggesting a shared commitment and responsibility for the child's learning between parents and educators. However, for some families, especially those from diverse cultural and linguistic contexts, opportunities to enact this shared role are not always prevalent. Drawing on both Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and Bowen's family systems approach, family centred practice as a model recognises that enacting partnerships is influenced by both the context surrounding the child (home, family, community), and the enabling opportunities educators create for families to feel empowered in this role (Rouse, 2012).

Across much of the literature, parent-educator partnerships are described using a number of terms such as 'parent involvement,' 'parent engagement' as well as 'parent partnership.' These terms, whilst being used interchangeably, do not necessarily reflect a common understanding, nor provide a clear definition of family partnerships in ECEC settings (Hedges & Lee, 2010). In contrast to a notion of partnership, "parent involvement is often described in relation to the active presence of a parent in the 'work' of the ECEC setting" (Hedges & Lee, 2010; Ho & Cherng, 2018; Rouse & Ware, 2017; Sime & Sheridan, 2014), and is often measured by the level to which the educational settings perceive the family to comply with these expectations (Woodrow et al., 2016). This approach to measuring parent involvement positions parents as responsible for children's academic achievement, where the dominant discourse of education is one in which literacy and numeracy are privileged (Delaune, 2019), and questions their level of involvement rather than

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focussing on what the educational setting could be doing to build reciprocal partnerships. Whitmarsh (2011) argues that when partnerships are viewed from this perspective, they are measuring something that may not be understood or even valued in non-western cultures. This misunderstanding can lead to a misalignment between the expectations of educators and those of families (Hadley & Rouse, 2018).

Parents from diverse cultural backgrounds may have an understanding of meaningful parental involvement that differs from how an educational setting or policy comprehends the concept. These parents may also experience barriers to their involvement (Ho & Cherng, 2018). Barriers such as low proficiency in the language of the receiving country; lack of capacity to attend events or other scheduled activities due to work, transport, or unfamiliarity with the systems; educator attitudes; and a lack of trust in the educators and the educational setting can result in parents being measured by their lack of participation (Ho & Cherng, 2018; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Hadley (2014) suggests that there can be a misalignment between the values of the educators and those of the families if there are differing perspectives in what is valued in curriculum and pedagogy between families and educators. This can lead to families being unfamiliar with the expectation to be involved in their child's educational setting or view education as the domain of the teacher. Tadesse (2014) also argues that educators' limited knowledge of the lived experiences of diverse families may lead to misunderstandings. Additionally, there can be an imbalance of power in the relationship, with the educator and educational setting being considered the experts (Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva, 2012; Einarsdottir & Jónsdottir, 2019). Educators' expectations and interpretations of parent roles, responsibilities, and capacities can also impact how families are perceived as being involved if these are discordant to that of other families, further marginalising families and leading to increased disconnection from their child's educational setting (Hands, 2013).

These tensions and discords result in furthering educators' perceptions that families are not interested in being involved or are disinterested in their child's education. It belies the barriers some families are facing, and the different understandings and expectations regarding their presence in the educational setting. When there is a misalignment between what it means to be involved, and how involvement is 'noticed,' it often culminates in deficit discourse, and can marginalise culturally and linguistically diverse families (Kim, 2009; Whitmarsh, 2011). Kim (2009) further argues that a deficit discourse which focusses on the perceived lack of involvement of diverse families, and aligning this to poorer academic outcomes for their children, is problematic and perpetuates notions of parents being a 'problem' rather than recognising the ways educational settings and educators may create barriers (inadvertently) to effective engagement (Thompson et al., 2018).

Practitioner inquiry

This chapter reports on the findings of a small research study conducted by one of the authors (Fay Hadley). The study included surveys with families and educators

(phase one) on the learning valued in the ECEC centre and the level of communication between families and educators. In phase two of the study, the researcher (first author) supported five educators, in four ECEC settings for three months to develop and implement a practitioner inquiry (PI) project focused on building partnerships with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to challenge the perceptions of the educators identified in phase one of the study.

The study focused on practitioner inquiry (PI) as a professional development tool for educators working with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Traditional forms of professional development (such as one-off workshops) delivered collectively to educators are being questioned in terms of transforming everyday practice (Hadley et al., 2015). Such approaches may be effective in transmitting knowledge but are argued to have limited value in changing professional practice. PI in contrast, can be an effective way to provide contextually relevant professional learning opportunities that draw on the strengths and experiences of individual educators and allows educators a level of subjectivity, where they can identify issues within their settings to investigate and create context-appropriate change (Fleet & Patterson, 2009; Fleet et al., 2016; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2013). In this study, implementing a PI approach provided the educators a space to investigate and reflect on partnerships with families in their centres. Reflecting with other professionals when considering and implementing change provided collegial opportunities, which Fleet and Patterson (2009) and Nuttall (2013) highlight as important and allowing for reflexivity. These authors suggest that such opportunities "involve[s] critical thinking that evaluates multiple perspectives in context and lead[s] to specific action in the classroom" (Lunn Brownlee et al., 2017, p. 242).

The research study

Five educators from four ECEC centres in Sydney, Australia participated in this phase of the study. They all held degree level early childhood teaching qualifications, and three were originally from another country. Years of experience varied from three to twelve years, and all were experienced in working with diverse families. Phase one of this study sought to investigate educators' perceptions about family partnerships, and involved parents and educators completing an on-line survey. The analysis of the survey responses revealed that the families and educators reported differently regarding what experiences were valued, as well as how much communication was occurring between families and educators (see Hadley, 2014). For instance, parents noted this lack of communication with comments such as: "From my experience, I often need to initiate the conversation" (parent 1, centre 4), and fathers who completed the survey highlighted communication happened more frequently with the mothers. Based on the findings, and after a discussion with the researcher, the educators involved in the PI projects postulated that culture could be impacting on what experiences were being valued. This resulted in them wanting to attempt other ways of communicating with families about children's learning to help reduce these disparities and build more effective partnerships. The

five educators chose and investigated a question (which included actions) for three months in order to better understand the families they worked with and to build more authentic partnerships with them.

This led to the development of the practitioner inquiry project, aimed at supporting the educators to develop more effective and culturally responsive partnerships and program content. The PI project was undertaken over a three-month time frame and during this period, the educators met with the researcher three times to discuss their PI. The educators also participated in an individual interview reflecting on their learning at the end the project.

The PI questions generated by the educator participants were:

- What do families understand about setting limits within a play-based curriculum? (Educator 1)
- How can the multicultural program be enhanced to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives? (Educator 2)
- How can I communicate effectively with parents about the educational components of an infant/toddler program? (Educator 3)
- How can I help families to be more familiar with and understand the Early Years Learning Framework? (Educator 4)
- How can I encourage families to have input into the program and their child's learning? (Educator 5)

These questions provided the educators a starting point for being more purposeful, sensitive and responsive to families' needs, hopes, and aspirations to create and sustain trusting relationships. The question provided the direction of the practitioner inquiry project. Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008, cited in Rönnerman et al., 2017) suggest "practices are constituted in three interdependent, interconnected and simultaneously occurring realms . . . which always occur simultaneously as 'sayings,' 'doings' and 'relatings'" (p. 6). They go on to suggest that these 'sayings,' 'doings' and 'relatings' are influenced by the specific conditions that shape the doing of an activity. By examining educator practices and analysing their 'sayings,' 'doings' and 'relatings' (Kemmis, 2009; Mahon et al., 2017; Rönnerman et al., 2017), we can begin to understand how their approach to parent partnerships evolved over the course of the project.

Sayings

'Sayings' are the "utterances and forms of understanding" (McMahon et al., 2017, p 8). The findings regarding what educators expressed about their role in building partnerships and why they had chosen their PI question suggested that educators' valued relational aspects with families (Rouse, 2012). Several of the educators drew on their own diverse backgrounds to illustrate this importance. For instance:

It's quite important that and I think is one of my strengths is I really like working with families. And obviously coming from a different culture background, I know how important it is working with them, trying to understand their points.

(Educator 1)

> I am an Indigenous New Zealander myself, so a lot of multiculturalism was encouraged and implemented within my teaching and it still is in Australia.
>
> *(Educator 2)*

The PI question chosen by the educators illustrated a key driver was improving communication with families, but their attitudes (sayings) varied. For example three of the PIs focussed on "How can I. . . " questions, reflecting a unidirectional approach whereby it is the educator's role to feed families' information. For instance:

> So they have got this nodding thing going but they still got that sort of blank look on their face like I really don't understood what you're saying but I just nod to make you happy. I was like, no that does not make me happy cause I can tell you are not understanding *what I'm trying to tell you* [author emphasis].
>
> *(Educator 5)*

This viewpoint lacked reciprocity, as the educator was only able to perceive how this was affecting her, rather than to position herself in the experience of the family (Hadley & Rouse, 2018).

However, two of the educators did focus on what they could do to build more authentic communication channels that would result in more effective partnerships with their families. For example:

> Not taking things for granted . . . a lot of communication. What I think happened is sometimes we think families have different beliefs and we take it for granted for a lot of stuff. And the way we communicated we think it's right. And we think we put in all that we can, but the message is not clear. So ok, we believe that they understand what we're doing but they're not. How can we figure that out?
>
> *(Educator 1)*

This example demonstrates a willingness and understanding to challenge her own perspective rather than positioning the family context as difficult.

These sayings suggest that educators had varying understandings of their role in developing authentic reciprocal partnerships. Whilst some were able to reflect on the nature of the communication to demonstrate a more reciprocal understanding, others could only focus on the problem or the disconnect, which resulted in the educators' discourse privileging their "way of seeing" the world, and dismissing the families' contributions (Beneke & Cheatham, 2016; Hadley, 2014).

Doings

The doings of a practice are the *modes of action* or the way the practice is performed (Salamon et al., 2016). Across the duration of the PI, many of the educators adopted strategies to better include and respond to diverse families. The educators were cognisant of language barriers and many had strategies that enabled communication; for example, translation of documents, using interpreters, or including staff in the setting who spoke the language. Many of the 'doings' mirrored the strategies identified by Hands (2013) as ways of engaging with families from diverse communities. For example, Educator 1's PI focussed on unpacking how curriculum and learning was communicated to families, as well as thinking about how this could become a shared understanding of what was valued. She was able to reflect on the positive outcome for families of using interpreters when orientating new families into the service.

> If the family does not speak the same language, we try to have a translator. It was really positive experience at beginning of this year. We did the orientation . . . with a family coming from Korea. They didn't speak English at all and we had one of our staff members sitting with me doing the interview and she was translating and it was great because the family . . . obviously their feeling they had from the beginning was very positive. And they just wanted to come and they just wanted to bring their child. Because they felt they could trust us. . . . At the end of their interview, he said he was very happy he could have the opportunity to have someone else to be able to communicate not just to listen to all these information but also to express all their concerns, all their questions.
>
> *(Educator 1)*

However, others noted that the 'doing' of involving interpreters could also create barriers to developing a trusting relationship with the family as the parent can feel more comfortable approaching the interpreters over the educator. In these instances, the educators' discussed the need to do more 'checking' with families, including asking directly: "Did you understand the information? Is there anything we can help you with . . . clarify if you're not 100% sure?" (Educator 5). Developing meaningful communication approaches to break down these perceived barriers and lack of trust was still challenging. During the PI educators were reflecting on ways they could continually adapt their practices. For example:

> I actually wrote a story this morning. So I was doing some programming on this child . . . about the child finding a sense of belonging here. And, it made me think of how I can do that for the family using the bi-cultural support worker.
>
> *(Educator 4)*

> After this research and everything what I'm trying to do is to have more face to face conversations with those families that I know that if I sent an email if I called them it won't work. . . . So what I'm trying to do is having

> conversations one to one, having meeting when they drop off or pick up. I'll try to grab them.
>
> *(Educator 1)*

These comments reflect the journey these educators were on in terms of rethinking the way they build partnerships with families, and illustrated the continued challenges. While they expressed a desire to make stronger connections, there was a sense of educators feeling inadequate in identifying strategies for this to be achieved (Silva et al., 2020).

Relatings

'Relatings' are the "ways in which people relate to one another and the world" (McMahon et al., 2017, p 8). In terms of relatings, in their reflections shared with the researchers during the final interview, some of the educators recognised that they were in a position of power and were trying to disrupt this to ensure they were enacting authentic partnerships with families. Some of the educators attributed their reframing occurred over the duration of the PI project. For instance:

> And when they talk to me, they look so nervous, really like "don't know what she's going to say to me, I don't know if I am going to understand her." I felt exactly the same way, but I've never thought about that; you know of them feeling scared of me or intimidated.
>
> *(Educator 4)*

Recognition of differing values

The educators also recognised that differing values held by either parents or educators impacted on the ability to work in partnerships with families. They recognised it required considerable effort, persistence, and time to understand each other's perspectives. For example:

> You don't want to say "no, it's not" you can't say what you are doing is wrong. But then you need to explain why you're doing it a different way and why that works for you. And try to get an agreement between both sides . . . compromise in one point and see what is better for the centre and the family but also what's best for the child.
>
> *(Educator 1)*

> I think having worked for so long with so many different families, I know how important relationships are. And how, sometimes you have to step up and really make an effort for them. But I don't think I've ever understood just or thought about how hard it must be for the families.
>
> *(Educator 4)*

Educators sense of identity and culture

Educators sense of identity also played a role in their confidence in building partnerships with the families. For instance, Educator 2 reflected that being bilingual meant she valued home languages and she always made an effort to learn some of the children's languages by encouraging the children to teach her, thereby trying to disrupt power imbalances. She recounted an interaction with a mother, who spoke Hebrew, noting:

> She came back to me and I said all the numbers. She was like, wow she was quite impressed. And she said I have really good pronunciation. I guess maybe it helps because I can speak Maori. And I felt good. And M (the child) felt proud that she taught me.
>
> *(Educator 2)*

Educator 4 also discussed her cultural identity and being bicultural as an important aspect of her relating to diverse families. For example:

> I think, for me, it was being from somewhere else too, even though we did not speak the same language. They might find it hard to speak English . . . I don't know whether it was the way they perceived me or (because) I am from somewhere else that made it easier for them to relate to me or, or vice versa. I might have found that easier to relate to them. . . . So it has been quite positive and I'm still working on that, you know . . . and becoming familiar with lots of different cultures.
>
> *(Educator 4)*

Another common strategy discussed by all educators was having staff who reflect the cultures in the ECEC centre. This was not only about communicating but also about staff being able to learn about other cultural ways of relating to develop their own cultural competence. For instance:

> That also comes from learning from staff who are also from those backgrounds as well. They explain why the families are doing this and I think "Ah, OK it makes more sense" . . . because sometimes you don't always necessarily ask the families why they are doing it but that's what helps. Having the staff is very important . . . you don't always want to offend the families but sometimes you can ask staff why are they doing that?
>
> *(Educator 3)*

Although it helps to have staff present who are inclusive of diverse backgrounds, this strategy could also lead to educators relying on the staff member who speaks the family's home language to build the partnership and interpret the cultural nuances. This is problematic if the educators themselves do not also build these partnerships,

interact with these families, or engage in conversations with these families about their hopes and dreams for their child. If educators are not confident in building their own cross-cultural understandings, it could contribute to perpetuating stereotypes.

PI as a tool for de-instrumentalising relationships with families

PI involves a process in which, through reflection and engagement, participants are 'finding out,' and developing their knowledge, understanding and practice in the context of their workplace environment. The findings from this study illustrate that the educators were attempting to de-instrumentalise their relationships with the families in their program; wanting to shift from more one-sided information-based interactions to more reciprocal partnership. The PI process created a context in which the educators were able to talk about their practice, concerns and challenges, identify and implement strategies to support more culturally responsive practices, and reflect on their own position and role in the context of the relationships they formed with the families. The PI projects provided opportunities for the educators to examine their values and practices with families, with some educators moving beyond a surface level of understanding and engagement; however, the short time frame (three months) meant that there was limited time to enact the projects, and limited time for educators to disrupt their sayings, doings, and relatings with the families. However, at the end of the three months, some of the educators were able to demonstrate an emerging awareness of really listening to families and their perspectives, with some reflecting on what they would be focussing on moving forward. Reflecting on their PI project provided some of the educators with an opportunity to challenge their expectations and assumptions of the families and children they were working with. However, not all were able to demonstrate this depth of awareness in the time frame, suggesting that for some educators having the time to enact and consolidate change is an important consideration.

The value of engaging in practitioner inquiry where there is a deliberate and targeted action to shift the nature of the parent-educator relationship towards a stronger partnership has shown to be an influential approach to building a more reciprocal understanding of the challenges culturally and linguistically diverse families are facing. The findings illustrate that for some educators there was a genuine desire to engage with families as equal partners. Reflecting on their PI project with the researcher provided some of the educators an opportunity to challenge their expectations and assumptions of the families and the children they were working with, and identity ways they could alter their practice to build more reciprocal relationships with families. Through engaging in the PI projects, these educators, with support from the researcher, were provided opportunities to examine their values and practices with families, moving beyond a surface level of understanding and engagement, to really explore and question their own practice (doings) on a deeper level. While we argue that the PI approach could be a supportive strategy to enable educators to rethink the way they engage families in a partnership space,

particularly those from non-western cultures, the project would need to occur over a more sustained time period, where educators can continue to engage in the cycle of action, reflection, re-action over time.

The findings from this small-scale study also present a number of opportunities for educators and ECEC settings to consider in shifting the imbalance between educators and diverse families, where educators are driving the nature of the interactions, to one where families' voices are heard and their experiences valued (Hadley, 2014). Additionally, educators often lack the necessary skills to identify and understand the specific needs of diverse families, and therefore there is a need for educators to gain greater intercultural understanding through engaging in ongoing learning and professional development (Beneke & Cheatham, 2016; Silva et al., 2020). This enhanced understanding will enable educators to engage more empathically with families, and recognise the hopes, dreams, aspirations they have for their children, as well as their expectations of educators, which may differ from the expectations that the educators have themselves.

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