

A Window to Belonging: Reimagining Family Partnerships

"It's been like a window into children's lives. I thought I knew our families well before home-based learning kicked in, but connecting with them online during this time has helped us to get to know them much better. I think it's something about the way technology opens up a shared and more personal space – not so public perhaps, more on their terms – guided by children and families." - Early Childhood Educator

Innovation, they say, is born of necessity. When it suddenly became necessary for early childhood educators to provide home-based learning opportunities for children isolated during a pandemic, the likes of which Australia had never experienced, decisions needed to be made. Educators swung into gear, many creating learning packs filled with a little of what children were missing in the program and encouraging families to support children to play and learn in the hands-on way they do in services around the country.

But something else is happening. Educators have created opportunities for more personal connections. They started talking with children and families on the phone and via online platforms generating an individualised experience and clarifying insights that had previously eluded both families and educators. For the first time, educators are reporting that families have felt comfortable sharing the routines and rituals of family life, the cultural aspects that give them meaning and the hopes and aspiration they have for their children's futures. Educators have witnessed capable and competent children speaking in their first language with grandparents (often with educators who share their language) about a world that they know and are proud of. Family members have been introduced to educators by excited children whose new-found confidence in what they have to share means conversations are much anticipated and last for longer than planned.

What is going on here? Has necessity given birth to a new way of connecting with families? Are we witnessing a shift in the way we collaborate? Could we have found a way to more respectfully honour the cultural and linguistic lives of the families who bring their children to early childhood education? And more importantly, how can we hold on to what we have discovered and craft a new and better normal?

As we re-imagine the parameters of these new collaborations, it's helpful to remind ourselves that seeking to work in respectful partnership with families is not new. For many years now, early childhood educators have been expected to design program and process that actively seek out and embed perspectives of all families.

Families are the primary influence in their children's lives; they often have strong beliefs and values regarding the education and care of their children. When families and services collaborate and build respectful relationships, children have the opportunity to develop a positive sense of self and experience respectful relationships. As well, the child, the family and the service do not exist in isolation; they are part of a much wider community (ACECQA, 2018 updated Jan 2020, p. 248).

Family-centred practice is essential for improving learning outcomes. Research shows that parents' involvement in their child's education is associated with improved learning outcomes for children. Family-centred practice promotes continuity of care for children in early childhood settings. By understanding and respecting family relationships and routines, professionals are able to provide children with greater continuity and more secure attachments and develop responsive learning programs which build on children's prior learning experiences (Cohrssen, Church, & Tayler, 2010, p. 4).

While such broad philosophical statements reflect the experience of many families as they engage with early childhood services, they disguise a more problematic reality. While educators seek 'collaborative and respectful relationships, that support children [to] have the opportunity to develop a positive sense of self' (ACECQA, 2018 updated Jan 2020, p. 252), these partnerships are often difficult to cultivate. Practice evidence and research findings (Cohrssen, Church, & Tayler, 2010) confirm that families and educators find it challenging to navigate cultural tensions, and all too often there is a mismatch of expectations and aspirations fuelled by assumptions and the dominating power of the majority view. Our efforts to build partnerships in this space result in token efforts that never entirely create the learning community we espouse.



It is worth noting that in the most recent edition of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (2016) challenges are acknowledged and professionals are invited to communicate in different ways and negotiate more equitable engagement.

Some families may find it challenging to engage with early childhood professionals because of their own experiences, for example, their language, cultural or socio-economic backgrounds, health or disability related issues. This requires early childhood professionals to use multiple ways to communicate with families, to negotiate and overcome barriers to equity and engagement (Department of Education and Training, 2016, p. 9).

When families cultural and linguistic identity challenge norms of early childhood educators, they are invited to consider other ways of knowing and being. Have the static and more traditional way of building partnerships reinforced the divide and maintained a cultural disconnect? Perhaps as children and families step into the early childhood spaces we have created, some of what makes them unique are withheld or separated or made to feel (subtly perhaps) unwelcome.

The privileging of English in early childhood services is a sobering example. English consumes the spaces – it is what you see and hear despite genuine efforts to recognise our multilingual community. If linguistic rights are so fundamental to identity why is first language so often positioned as ‘other’ – a line on an enrolment form, a poster on a wall or a few keywords recited at arrival. Why don’t we see the robust commitment to a ‘right-based approach to the education of bilingual children and engagement in a ‘multilingual ecology’ that has been recently articulated in the VCAA Supporting Bilingualism, Multilingualism and Language Learning in the Early Years? An approach that elevates aspects of a family’s identity and builds the platform for reciprocity.

A rights-based approach to the education of bilingual children highlights the importance of supporting the right of children to learn their family and community languages to a proficient and fluent level. It acknowledges the cultural, ancestral and spiritual value of languages, and promotes equity and diversity. It promotes bilingualism for all children, and features multilingualism as an asset and a goal for Victorian children, families and communities. It supports language learning, bilingual experiences and interactions, and translanguaging. Languages are accorded a high and equal value, the space to be featured and represented in the physical environment (such as in signs, meetings, labels and resources), and the time to be used, learnt and practised by children, families and educators (VCAA, 2020).

Ironically, the very thing that we thought might separate us further, social isolation and the shift to online interactions that would create a more palpable divide between families and educators, might be the mechanism that helps us re-imagine more fruitful connections. Connections built on reciprocity where ‘there is a respect for the differing values, beliefs and expectations... creating a space whereby each learns from the other and will be changed in the process’ (Hadley & Rouse, 2018). In this approach there is a reaching out and ‘a reconciling of all points of view and a search for consensus between the partners, recognising that each party has a particular knowledge and expertise to share (Hadley & Rouse, 2018).



So, what might a re-imagined – post-crisis – connection with families look like?

Might we use the window that home-based learning and online communication has given us to reshape a relationship that:

- dedicates time throughout the enrolment and orientation process where families have an opportunity to share through online communication the part of their lives that they believe shape their child's identity
- more formally recognises the learning and development that child has already undertaken before joining the early childhood service and develops ways to record that as part of the assessment process
- privileges languages other than English through the employment of bilingual staff whose voices are heard through the program
- provides opportunities for children and families to speak to educators in their first language with the assistance of bilingual staff or regular interpreters
- develops new communication methods that welcome more personal and more regular connections with families that provide an opportunity to share children's progress and essential aspects of family life with the service
- recognises families' capacity as their child's first teachers and welcomes them into a shared conversation about understanding children's learning and development

In this re-imagined understanding of family partnerships, the window that we created for our online communication during the COVID-19 response, stays in place. The insights we have gained by opening this window and seeing each other in new ways ought not be closed shut.

We can open it wider and use innovation in our everyday practice as a platform to build reciprocity. In so doing, we truly recognise children's social and cultural lives and the learning and growing they pursue with their first and most important teachers.

References

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