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Partnerships in early childhood education

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Early childhood is an important time for children, as the learning they gain during this period sets the foundations for lifelong growth and development (Giovacco-Johnson, 2009). It is also a precious time for families because they have aspirations for their children and have expectations as to what their children will gain through education that will support them now and in the future (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996). It is, therefore, pivotal that education during this time of children’s lives actively promotes and practices partnerships between parents and teachers. The first section of this paper identifies two critical points associated with the perspectives offered by the literature, while the other sections explore: characteristics of effective partnerships; barriers to partnerships; benefits of partnerships; and best practice.

The majority of the literature acknowledges parent-teacher partnerships, but only Stetson, Stetson, Sinclair, & Nix (2012) recognise that partnerships should also include the active participation of the child. Souto-Manning & Swick (2006) and Kersey & Masterson (2009) acknowledge a role for children in these partnerships, but more in a motivational sense. Another aspect that is present within all the literature is a strong socio-cultural perspective in the writing, with many researchers openly stating that they have utilised an ecological approach when exploring parent-teacher partnerships. This ‘focus’ contradicts the authors’ own argument, because they advocate for equal and equitable partnerships, yet none have actually drawn upon parents’ perspectives to any degree other than a token note. How, then, can equality and equity be achieved when such a bias is instilled in the literature?

Characteristics of effective partnerships

Souto-Manning & Swick (2006) identify effective partnerships relying on teachers understanding the dynamics and diversity of families for effective partnerships. Gartrell (2012) supports this by recommending the use of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model, as it supports teachers in recognising all levels of influence upon both the child and family, and the implementation of partnership strategies to effectively address each partner.

Christenson, Palan and Scullin (2009); Davies (1997); Giovacco-Johnson (2009); Kersey & Masterson (2009); Powell and McCauley (2011); Schumacher (2000); and Ministry of Education (1996) all concur by highlighting that the socio-
cultural approach requires a teacher to critically reflect and confront any biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and deficit views of families and partnerships. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) and Gartrell (2012) advocate that it is the duty of educators to empower all parents to recognize the active role they already play in their child’s education and explore the potential of working in partnership with teachers for their children. Christenson, Palan and Scullin (2009); Davies (1997); Souto-Manning and Swick (2006); and Webster-Stratton (1999) suggest that teachers must also acknowledge that schooling may not have been a positive experience for parents/families and that they may have to work particularly hard to dispel their perceptions and fears, particularly important in the New Zealand context when working with whānau Māori and minority groups. Therefore, teachers need to build parents’ confidence that their centre encounters will result in positive interactions and success for their child and for them (Kersey & Masterson, 2009). Teachers providing positive affirmations and reassurance allows parents to deal with their feelings of uncertainty, inadequacy and/or intimidation. This then leads to confidence and self-esteem, which then leads on to empowerment. Christenson, Palan and Scullin (2009) compare well with all the other authors in advocating parental empowerment, but they disagree with the idea that teachers can empower parents without careful nurturing.

**Barriers to partnerships**

A major barrier and challenge for teachers in New Zealand are cultural perspectives where Te Ao Māori, Pasifika, and Confucianism recognise the teacher as the expert in education, thus parents from these backgrounds may find it hard involving themselves in partnerships, as to do so may be perceived as undermining the ‘mana’ (influence, status, expertise) of the teacher. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) suggest that, where a teacher is aware and understands these cultural perspectives, they are in a position to source cultural advisors to help them identify strategies that would invite participation from families with such beliefs, and that they would also be able to approach the parents and families in a culturally appropriate manner and thereby establish partnerships with shared commitments. Shared commitments and responsibility between centres (teachers) and parents/families in the learning and development of children is essential and relies on forming partnerships where strengths, challenges, perceptions, and priorities can be viewed as complementary, rather than conflicting (Giovacco-Johnson, 2009). In many instances, the reverse is viewed, thus forming a barrier. A real partnership is surely one in which families and centres share information, using what they learn from each other to change how they work with children (Christenson, Palan, & Scullin, 2009).

Another potential difficulty in establishing partnerships that Christenson, Palan and Scullin (2009); Kersey & Masterson (2009); Webster-Stratton (1999); Davies (1997); and Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) all caution against is the ‘traditional’ paradigm of partnerships, where centre suggestions and expectations upon families are closely aligned with the needs and priorities of teachers, thereby disempowering and excluding parents’ and families’ involvement in their children’s education. *Te Whāriki* is strongly in contrast with this traditional paradigm, advocating shared expectations and a non-biased approach to partnership (MoE, 1996). Giovacco-Johnson (2009) and Kersey
and Masterson (2009) support Te Whāriki in its general view on promoting effective partnerships, but suggest that the notion of sameness does not recognise individual family differences, but, rather, assumes all families are the same. New Zealand history shows the dangers of the 'one approach fits all', where Māori and other minority groups were failed by an education system due to this failure to recognise difference (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Christenson, Palan and Scullin (2009) support this by noting that the traditional paradigm impedes the actuality of how parents and families are involved in their children’s lives, and point out that a key problem with this paradigm is that it is embedded in a compensating type view, where particular parent qualities may be seen as deficiencies or weaknesses. For example, if teachers do not hold the same views or beliefs on something that a parent does, the child may start being treated in a deficit manner, therefore discouraging any type of partnership. This cycle of negativity may explain why some parents participate more in centre communities than others (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

Powell (as cited in Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006) states that teachers’ beliefs are heavily influenced by current and past contextual and cultural elements; for example, their own childhood experiences impacting on arrangements they make in developing parent/family involvement. Partnerships can also be constrained by poor communication strategies. Christenson, Palan and Scullin (2009) and Gonzalez-Mena (as cited in Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006) suggest it is easy for teachers to say they believe in parental involvement, however, when confronted by a parent with a different view, a teacher’s perspective or the centre culture may stand dominant, thereby signalling to parents that their role is limited. Comer and Fine (as cited in Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006) likens this to bullying, and identifies it as a barrier to effective parent-teacher partnerships.

**Benefits to partnerships**

The first benefit of parent-teacher partnerships for children is the promotion of meaningful learning, which enhances children’s development (Giovacco-Johnson, 2009). Their achievements improve, they become more successful learners, have fewer absences and are more motivated to succeed (Kersey & Masterson, 2009; Stetson, Stetson, Sinclair & Nix, 2012). Longer term benefits include: attaining a higher academic level in secondary school; and remaining at school for a longer period of time (Kersey & Masterson, 2009). Schumacher (2000); Powell & McCauley (2011); and Gartrell (2012) affirm that, when parents are involved in their child’s education at school/centre, the child does better, assisting the children to make lasting educational gains, setting a solid foundation into the future. A benefit of partnerships for parents, according to Vopat (as cited Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006) is that their aspirations can be better met. Furthermore, in working with teachers to connect the home environment with that of the centre, parents have an opportunity to reflect upon and deconstruct the environment they have established at home to determine whether it serves their children well. Another benefit is that the parent(s) gain confidence that they are no longer in isolation, but have support from teachers when necessary. Swick, Da Ros and Kovach (as cited in Swick, 2004) believe this is a pivotal aspect of partnerships because there are benefits in sharing information about the child’s life at home and in the centre, and for parents in having an empathetic ear in times of stress. In modernity, where work and life pressures draw parents away from their children, partnerships with teachers
allow parents to retain a connection to their child (Powell & McCauley, 2011), and also instil confidence that their child is not only being educated, but cared for by the teachers. Powell and Garbarino (as cited in Swick, 2004) suggest parents need assurance that their children will be genuinely cared for.

For teachers, partnerships open effective two-way communication, which provides a rich, comprehensive picture of a child, and, thus, a more individualised approach to their learning needs can be identified, and more informed intervention developed where necessary (Powell & McCauley, 2011; Davies, 1997). Effective partnerships also help the teacher to better understand the child's perspective and temperament, so that they tailor the classroom activities, discussions, and environment to include the child's special interests, personality, family situation and culture (Webster-Stratton, 1999). This depth of information and connection helps teachers to see the child from a human ecology perspective, rather than a numerical one (that is, dealing with people, rather than ratios), and helps recognise that the child is an extension of their family and everything that makes up the family, such as the gene pool, lifestyle, ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Gonzalez-Mena & Gestwicki, as cited in Gatrell, 2012).

**Good practice**

Powell and McCauley (2011) believe that good practice must begin by both parties having clear understandings of their roles in the relationship. For parents, this entails recognising that they are not simply caregivers, but are the child's first teacher. For teachers, this requires a willingness to work in partnership and an understanding around where their role in education and care begins and ends. Kersey and Masterson (2009) agree by stating that the parents' role is in caring and educating, while the teachers' role is in educating and caring. This reversal offers a distinction between the personal and professional connections each has with the child. The next improved practice lies in establishing a connection, and Kersey and Masterson (2009) believes the teacher is in the best position to initiate this connection. They suggest that a ten-minute conversation can show a personal interest in the parent, which can make all the difference in establishing a meaningful partnership. Giovacco-Johnson (as cited in Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006) agrees with Powell and McCauley (2011) and Kersey and Masterson (2009) by identifying for teachers a ‘six-element empowerment paradigm' to promote parent partnerships:

1. Focus on family and child strengths
2. Include, validate and engage families
3. Recognise and value multiple forms of involvement
4. Provide lifelong learning for teachers
5. Build trust through collaboration
6. Reflect linguistic and cultural appreciation, recognition and responsiveness.

Webster-Stratton (1999); Stetson, Stetson, Sinclair and Nix (2012); Schumacher (2000); Christenson, Palan and Scullin (2009); and Gatrell (2012) all acknowledge similar aspects as Giovacco-Johnson (as cited in Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006), but also see the role of the program in supporting the partnership. For them, the centre program must welcome and honour families; incorporate their voices in the planning, implementing, and evaluating of the
program, acknowledge the presence of the family within the physical structure of the centre and be adaptable and flexible to meet the changing needs of both the child and their family. Kersey and Masterson (2009) suggest that this is potentially the one area that is often overlooked, because many teachers do not have the time or energy to redevelop a plan. This decrease of energy can also impact momentum, to which Davies (1997) suggests can be revitalised simply by ensuring the partnerships are strong, because neither partner would want to disappoint the other, so they commit more to retaining the partnership. Davies also identifies smart communication, which entails knowing the different audiences you want to reach, and designing innovative ways to reach them. Some parents like newsletters, while others prefer emails, phone calls, notes in their child’s bags, facebook updates, twitter updates, electronic journals, children’s portfolios, and face to face communication. While Christenson, Palan and Scullin (2009) agree with Davies on these avenues of communication, they also caution around using one way communication like newsletters and notes. Powell and McCauley (2011) add to this by reminding us that information is power, and, should the teacher be the sole person sharing the information about the children, power remains with them, thus equal and equitable partnerships cannot be fostered. To address this, Christenson, Palan and Scullin (2009) identify several ways for parents to share information and involvement. These include: home visits; meet at a mutually agreed upon place; meet on neutral ground; and meet in a social setting.

**Conclusion**

The partnership between teachers and parents is still primarily managed by teachers, and, while the literature and *Te Whāriki* advocate for equal and equitable partnerships, there remains aspects of New Zealand’s practice that continue to hinder advancement. This will take time and will require the concerted efforts of all teachers to critically reflect and commit to establishing healthy and meaningful partnerships with the parents of the children they educate and care for. As previously noted, the literature identifies a need for more research from the parents’ perspective so that an equal understanding can be better gained. A more encompassing model is needed that emphasises the existing power of whānau and creates empowerment strategies where skills and talents in diverse and culturally responsive modes can be applied (Comer & Heath, as cited Souto-Manning, 2005).

**References**


