

Belongingness in diversity: Evidence-based practices for including children and diverse family structures in the early childhood setting

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Father's Day is coming up and the teaching team decide to celebrate all fathers. However, there is a slight dilemma. What do you say to George who has two mothers and no father? How will you explain this to Charlotte, whose only known father figure ever since she was born is her granddad? What do you tell Wiremu, Paul and Sophia, who are being raised solely by their mothers? This is the reality of families today. Children come from diverse families and the nuclear family model of the 1950s and 1960s - a mother, a father and a child or children, is only one of the many family structures.

It seems that cultural traditions have not caught up with the changes to family forms, and teachers may find themselves in situations where celebrations are gender-specific, such as Father's Day. Should these traditions be celebrated at all, knowing that having such activities will exclude some children and their families? There is a compelling reason not to. If we choose to celebrate Father's Day, it may greatly affect the sense of belonging of children and families where a father plays a minor role or is absent or does not exist. We may assume that the parents or families of children without a father figure may not desire to take part in such activities. On the other hand, when children experience celebrations that are embedded in cultural traditions, these add to their funds of knowledge and cultural tools, which they use to make sense of their world. Should teachers be selective in choosing traditions to celebrate in order to demonstrate inclusivity? So, what are educators to do?

There are many ways of being a family. Our understanding of what constitutes a family can be based on size, structure, configuration or shape. Gonzalez-Mena (2010) provides a range of examples such as two-parent families, single-parent families, extended families with several generations in one household, stepfamilies, blended families, and biracial families. She also mentions the phenomenon of transnational and migrant families who may live in two or more countries because of parental work. Regardless of family type, children have the right to live in a society where they and their families are accepted for who they are. Lee (2010) describes acceptance as being visible and seen in all educational settings and this right starts in early childhood where diverse families are welcome. To avoid disengagement, failure and exclusion (Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Purdue & Surtees, 2012) especially when responding to the needs of children and their diverse families, three evidence-based strategies are presented in this article. The strategies are not 'one size fits all' but should be adapted to suit each setting.

The first strategy is for teachers to confront their own bias so they can be inclusive in their practice and support children to develop their understanding of diverse families. Imagine a teacher with conservative parents, who had a particular religious education and is surrounded by people with the same upbringing or a similar social context. That is all the teacher knows and believes. A teacher's worldview is based on personal experience. When she encounters people with a different background, how would she react, what would she do? Bruce, Meggitt and Grenier (2010) state that humans by nature are not comfortable with change and are uneasy around people who are different, showing stranger fear. Stranger fear may lead to bias. According to the online Oxford dictionary (2018), bias suggests showing prejudice against a person or group. To be effective in the education and care of children, teachers must confront their own underlying feelings first. Intentional teachers could use reflective practice to learn about themselves and work through their bias to build their capacity to be inclusive.

Reflecting on deep-rooted values and beliefs in diverse families is a way to examine and confront bias. According to Smyth (2001), “If teachers are going to uncover the nature of the forces that inhibit and constrain them, and work at changing those conditions” (p. 193), then the role of reflection on values and beliefs is vital to their professional learning. In a study by Maude et al. (2009) on reflective practice and working with diverse families, they asked participants to reflect on these questions after role-playing family scenarios. In the same way, teachers can use these same questions to reflect on their own values and beliefs and examine their own bias especially regarding family types that are unfamiliar.

What do you notice about your reaction to this family/situation?
What thoughts and feelings are dominating your experience right now?
Was there anything that made you feel uncomfortable?
How does this family compare to your own family?
Did you make any assumptions about this family/situation?
What is one thing you might do in the future as a result of this scenario?
Did anything in this family cause you to understand diversity in a way that you had never considered before?
(Maude et al., 2009, p. 45).

When teachers reflect and confront their bias, this will positively impact on the taha wairua of children and families as there is a shared understanding of “the links between the human situation and the environment” (Durie, 1994, p. 71). When teachers carefully and thoroughly examine their own thinking and begin to positively interact with people who are different, children’s own values are influenced by this. Only then can teachers help children in developing their own understanding of diverse families.

The second strategy is to create an environment where a sense of belonging can occur for children and their diverse families. In early childhood, an often overlooked environment is the interpersonal (Gordon & Browne, 2016). When children transition from home to the early childhood setting, the common assumption is for children to overcome separation from their primary carer at home. Gelnow (2005) shows us an alternative idea: instead of focusing on overcoming separation, teachers should instead support children to form attachments with at least one teacher. She further explains that when children are able to separate from the bonds that they developed at home, they are better able to transfer that bond to a teacher and use this to navigate their way in the family of the early childhood setting.

Gelnow (2005) raises another point that at the transition phase of forming attachment children also need to feel that their family is welcomed, included and celebrated. Only then will they feel valued, included and welcomed - that they belong. Lee (2010) reports in her research on the experiences of same-sex families in early childhood settings that children learn by their early experiences who is, and who is not valued in society. This then means that activities in the setting that celebrate conventional family types and gender specific parents may send the wrong signal that some families are not valued because their family is different and this may lead to a sense of shame. Early childhood teachers need to take care to prevent this. Therefore, to avoid alienating children and diverse families, teachers must be liberal in their attitude and interactions and accept all family forms. This meets the aspiration in *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) that “children will develop confidence that their family background is viewed positively” (MoE, 2017, p. 37) and gives children confidence in their self-identity (Darebin Community Health Centre, n.d.). Valuing each and every family creates a positive impact on the waiora or “the total wellbeing for the individual [child] and the family” (Durie, 1994, p. 75).

To develop a liberal and accepting attitude and build confidence, the Darebin Community Health Centre (n.d.) suggests that attending professional development will help teachers to gain skills and to create environments that reflect and affirm difference. Lee (2010) suggests websites of organisations such as the Rainbow Families Group for information and resources to help teachers to deepen their understanding of diversity and get practical ideas on what to do. Gelnow (2005) recommends that centre policies should explicitly state that all families are welcome and celebrated. For example, a welcome letter that describes the diverse ways that families may be composed and that everyone is part of the centre community. Having a non-discrimination policy also contributes to creating a sense of belonging. To create a feeling of welcome, Gelnow also suggests having a family photo gallery where parents, teachers and children can stop to look and converse with one another. To involve families, she recommends finding ways for parents to be part of the classroom such as asking them to volunteer. This benefits their children, as they are able to experience sameness and difference (2005).

Hadley and de Gioia (2008) suggest that teachers facilitate relationships with and amongst families so they may feel a sense of belonging. These authors say that families from diverse backgrounds may not feel comfortable in developing relationships with other families. Hadley and de Gioia (2008) recommend teachers take an active role by organising networking activities to promote family-to-family relationships. To develop and sustain the family-teacher partnership, they highlight the necessity to move beyond looking at early childhood settings as only community hubs and meeting places and adapt the program to suit the needs of children and families. One way is to identify critical issues that families face, discuss them without judgement and map the resources and support available. The teachers could then liaise with agencies to connect with families so they are able to get outside resources and access to programs if such needs arise.

When families feel a sense of belonging, children feel it too. Acknowledging and celebrating families brings about healthy taha whānau, another key dimension of health (Durie, 1994). One of the guiding principles of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* is the principle of family and community, where the commitment to collaborate with all families and whānau is also affirmed (MoE, 2017).

The third strategy is to introduce into the early childhood setting resources that inform understandings of family diversity and send a message that diversity is acceptable. In a study that explored parents' perspectives on inclusive education, Ullman and Ferfolja (2016) note that parents acknowledge the limits to their own personal experience and support the introduction of family diversity in their children's education. These authors say that children are not yet prejudiced and are receptive to an inclusive perspective that promotes social cohesion.

Resources that are inclusive of diverse families will encourage play experiences that are inclusive of all children. Resources should enable children to make their own choices in selecting groupings that have meaning for them when they construct families for play (Gelnow, 2015). When children play in a safe and secure environment they are able to communicate their thoughts and feelings, which then positively affect the health dimension of taha hinengaro (Durie, 1994). Gelnow (2005) suggests that children also need to hear inclusive words as part of everyday language to add to their vocabulary. She further recommends that the teacher might gently guide children, when they are playing about families with a mother and father, to allow for the exploration of other types of family where there may be only one parent or parents of the same sex. Teaching teams would collaboratively plan strategies for their setting. According to MacNaughton and Williams (2009), specific verbal encouragement can be a positive motivator for children's learning as this type of encouragement extends the process of thinking in the play experience.

Reading materials that celebrate diverse family structures should be made available as well. Day-to-day conversations with children about their family help to make them feel included. Family pictures should be proudly displayed on the wall or on tables that children use to play. For example, at the art table, create a centrepiece with a few of the family pictures. Resources and daily conversations highlight the uniqueness of each child and their family and this helps in promoting mana ake (Durie, 1994).

In 2016, the Children's Commissioner reported that eight percent of the population are children aged zero to four years old. That is 312,000 children, the majority of whom live in two-parent households while the rest live in sole-parent or multi-adult households (Children's Commissioner, 2016). While government statistics do not qualify family forms, it is projected that sole-parent and multi-adult household families will increase. We can generalise that in the near future diverse families will be typical in Aotearoa New Zealand society and in early childhood settings.

Now to return to my earlier question. What about Father's Day? It is great to celebrate this occasion in an early childhood setting. It is an opportunity for teaching teams to engage in conversations around inclusiveness. It can be a time for children, parents and teachers to acknowledge and affirm diverse family forms. For teachers confronting personal bias, reflective practice will be valuable for beginning to create an environment with a sense of belonging. The provision of resources on family diversity is one way to include children and their diverse families in an early childhood setting. The three evidence-based strategies presented in this article are sure to benefit the holistic learning and development of children.

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