Journeying towards meaningful connections: A reflection on the inclusion of parents in the assessment of children's learning

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Early childhood education (*ECE*) *in Aotearoa New Zealand highlights partnership between teachers and parents as crucial to children's educational success. This article critically questions the implementation of a partnered approach, as espoused by the national early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum* (*Te Whāriki*) (*Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017*). *Specifically discussed is parent inclusion in the assessment of children's learning, drawing on the findings of an empirical study which investigated parents' and teachers' perceptions concerning the role of the parents in sociocultural assessment practices* (*Pennells, 2017*). *In particular, the findings noted a disparity in knowledge levels regarding the sociocultural approach to learning. Tensions relating to two-way communication and the power to participate are discussed. This article provides an opportunity for reflection encouraging the reader to consider how partnerships in the process of assessment are genuinely inclusive of parents.*

Introduction

Partnership with parents is deemed an essential component of quality early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand (MoE, 2011). There is significant literature that reports on the benefits to, and positive impacts on, children's outcomes when parents are actively involved in their learning (Carr & Lee, 2012; Clarkin-Phillips, 2012; Mitchell & Furness, 2015). This has implications for services in how they support the construction of a community of learners that invites and supports parent participation. The early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) upholds the integral role family and community have in the design and delivery of each service's program. Building on the philosophical foundations of the original document (MoE, 1996) a focus of the implementation of the updated curriculum is that all children have the right to access the depth and breadth of the curriculum. Crucial to this is the acknowledgement and respect for the uniqueness of all children and their whānau. Affirming the importance of a collaborative approach, the Education Review Office ([ERO], 2016) reports improved success when there are strong links between home and the service.

The implementation of effective assessment in ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand has gained recognition in recent times with an emphasis on improved outcomes and accountability. Over a decade ago, formative assessment was introduced to align with the principles of *Te Whāriki* (Carr, 2001). This sociocultural approach to assessment identifies with children's preferred learning dispositions and builds on their existing knowledge and skills. The inclusion of families' funds of knowledge, shared by parents, assists teachers in giving value to the contextual and relational influences in children's lives. The complexities of teachers' understandings of formative sociocultural assessment and implementation of this approach which features the learning story, a narrative account of learning, has been examined in numerous studies (Cooper, 2012; Davis, 2006; Turnock, 2009). Noted by Niles (2016) were the challenges in gaining multiple perspectives (including the parent voice) despite teachers using a range of strategies such as being available during non-contact time, including snippets of conversation in documentation and inviting parents to contribute information on their child's interests. A study by Whyte (2016) that explored including the parent voice before the full learning story is written, concluded that this had a positive effect on enriching planned learning pathways, enabling links between home and the centre and strengthening parent-child dialogue. According to Mitchell and Furness (2015) little has been investigated about what is understood about parent involvement and its influence in the process of assessing children's learning.

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Inherent in implementing a sociocultural focus to assessing learning are the tensions exposed, where the underlying purpose of policy approaches, such as school readiness, can inhibit democratic practices (Mitchell & Carr, 2014). Economic considerations, increased marketisation and managerial expectations also have implications, as found by Cameron, McLachlan and Rawlins (2016) who report a lack of allocated non-contact time as well as MoE and ERO expectations influenced the quality and frequency of assessment. The focus of the study discussed in this article centres on the gap in effectively engaging with parents in ways that enrich children's learning through informing sociocultural assessment practices.

Learning together: A personal journey

Throughout Aotearoa New Zealand a diverse range of ECE services exist, with each individual facility offering varying levels of parent involvement guided by their own philosophies and management structure (MoE, 2017). My personal interest in the inclusion of parents in their children's learning arose through my involvement in the playcentre movement. Parents are a natural component of the day-to-day running of the playcentre and are central in their philosophy of families growing and learning together (Densem & Chapman, 2000). As a parent in this environment, I embraced being directly involved in the assessment of both my own and other children. Moving onto employment in a community preschool I completed my early childhood training. Managing the perplexities of larger groups of children, less direct involvement of parents and an increasing drive for accountability documentation proved multi-faceted and challenging. This complexity resulted in the undertaking of research for a master's thesis that took a closer look at one group of teachers' and parents' and their understandings of the parents' role in sociocultural assessment. The following sections report on the research design, methodology and findings of my master's thesis research.

Research design and methodology

The key theoretical underpinning used to guide this study was constructivism. A constructivist perspective recognises that knowledge and understandings are built through a process of constructed meaning as people make sense of their experiences (Amineh & Asl, 2015). The overall research aim was to investigate parents' and teachers' understandings of the parents' role in sociocultural assessment practices and how their contributions were invited and then used to inform the next steps in planning. A sociocultural approach to learning and assessment values children's connections with their wider world and includes contributions from families. Sociocultural theory aligns with a constructivist view on knowledge, where collaboration between parties contributes to knowledge building and the emergence of new ideas. Therefore, listening to the insights and understandings of those directly involved was pertinent in order to develop deeper understandings of their experiences (Gray, 2013). A favoured aspect of constructivism is the possibility this opens for all participants to learn from the experience, that was an aspect particularly relevant to this project (Mertens, 2010).

My choice of this underpinning theoretical perspective recognised the multiple and varied understanding of individual participants. The voices of both teachers and parents were gathered contributing to the construction of the understanding and meanings influencing current practice and involvement. Constructivism like sociocultural theory embraces the contextual influences, the uniqueness of the individual and acknowledges the importance of participant's interactions with people, places and things in making sense of everyday experiences. Knowledge is constructed through initial experiences and modified through ongoing interactions (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Mertens, 2010). According to Mertens (2010) "researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (p. 16).

This study drew on a qualitative case study methodology of one early childhood setting. All parents who had a child

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enrolled at the centre were invited to complete an open-ended questionnaire. Thirty-six parents responded, from which five were selected for an interview. I used maximum variation sampling to choose these to ensure the data gained reflected the experiences of a range of parents across the centre. I chose purposeful sampling to select five teachers with a cross-section of experience to also participate in individual interviews and a teachers' focus group. As I was aware of the ethical considerations to preserve their anonymity, all parent and teacher interviewees were assigned pseudonyms (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study was guided by three research questions: (i) How do teachers view the parents' role in assessment? (ii) To what extent do teachers invite and utilise parents' contributions in assessment practices? (iii) How do parents view their role in their child's learning and what do they understand about participating in their child's assessment?

A qualitative research approach was employed as the aim was to develop a deeper understanding of the parents' role in sociocultural assessment practices. Qualitative research is a useful tool for gaining insights where there is interest in knowing more about a specific aspect of practice (Harwell, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The subjective and naturalistic approach to qualitative research entails the collection of data in everyday settings with the potential to elicit rich data from respondents' experiences of the phenomenon (Griffin, 2004). Multiple data gathering methods were used, including; a document analysis of profile books, a parent questionnaire, semi-structured interviews with both parents and teachers and a teacher focus group. Data gathered from both the document analysis and parent questionnaires helped to refine the guiding questions used to facilitate conversation in the semi-structured interviews. The focus group held at the conclusion of all other data gathering methods was valuable in obtaining information about the group's beliefs on the research phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The data collected was coded and analysed to highlight major emerging themes. The discussion of findings drew on the theoretical concepts of communities of learning and funds of knowledge, which provided a critical lens. Communities of learning are groups of people sharing a common interest who work collaboratively to learn how to do better (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). A communities of learning model highlights the importance of understanding and managing what facilitates or hinders active participation. Funds of knowledge are described by Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992) as the collective knowledge and skills foundational to the functioning of households and individuals. Using funds of knowledge as a framework for recognising and responding to children's existing expertise has been supported in recent literature and aligns with the sociocultural underpinning of *Te Whāriki* (Cooper & Hedges, 2014).

Two-way communication: The crux to parent inclusion

In this study, teachers and parents reported that face-to-face communications were the preferred method for sharing knowledge and establishing a relationship of trust. However, whilst teachers had the best of intentions in building partnerships with parents, the data suggested that the availability and successful coordination of time for communicating by both parties was not always available. This limited the openings for exchanges of information leaving the parent with ambivalent feelings and mixed responses in relation to understandings of inclusion. A parent questionnaire respondent comments, "I don't believe we share enough only on the off chance of chatting with a teacher" (Pennells, 2017, p. 70). In addition, the difference in agendas around communications were identified. Parents' wishes to learn about their child's day were at the forefront of their daily informal exchanges, whilst teachers often focussed on gaining assessment information. Parents in this study requested uninterrupted time with teachers, reflecting a desire to connect and be active as valued assessors. This highlighted for teachers some misconceptions relating to the communication needs and understandings of both parties. Bringing together the voices of teachers and parents suggests a greater shared understanding of the purpose of communications is central to improving the effectiveness of two-way exchanges.

Assessment documentation which makes visible valued learning was collated in profile books in the centre in this study.

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Teachers contributed learning stories evidencing children's progressive learning and development. The books were available to both parents and children to revisit and contribute to. However, a finding from the document analysis of profile books illustrated minimal parent voices being recorded in learning stories, signalling that the documented learning did not provide a location for the engagement of multiple voices as suggested in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). This effected the potential for the profile book to act as a communication medium and a tool for connecting across contexts as discussed by Carr and Lee (2012). Parent involvement in documentation was invited by way of an aspiration form, pictorial accounts of families' special events and in a small number of books a space was allocated for parents to add their ideas. Parent feedback documented in the aspiration form was an important consideration for teachers in planning ongoing learning. Whilst parents appreciated the profile books as a way of being informed about their child's learning, the findings showed parents often felt they were catching up on learning that had already happened and did not view the books as an interactive site for two-way exchanges. A parent interviewee, Carmen, comments "Like sometimes I've seen pictures in their books and I go, oh my gosh… I was never told" (Pennells, 2017, p. 68). This illustrates the limited effect of this documentation as a two-way communication tool inclusive of parents.

I have no idea what's in it? Building a shared understanding of a sociocultural curriculum

A significant finding from this study was the disparity in understandings in relation to the roles of both teachers and parents in sociocultural learning. Whilst teachers believed parents to be integral participants, parents reported minimal knowledge of the curriculum. As parent Carmen shared, "I would have no idea what's in it…basically it shows that you guys just don't babysit" (Pennells, 2017, p. 80). Involvement was reported as being mainly through the filling in of forms, pictorial contributions of holidays/special events and daily informal sharing. Without knowledge of why teachers valued connecting with children's wider worlds, little understanding of how parents' input influenced the learning happening for their child was reported.

The curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) identifies family and community as fundamental participants in the implementation of the curriculum, parents, however, did not view this as their role. Consequently, this impacted on their understandings of the teacher's role in gaining assessment information and influenced parents' willingness and confidence to contribute to the decision-making about their child's learning. Parent interviewee Maree's comment is illustrative of her uncertainty in regards to having a role: "I don't know how much I can say" (Pennells, 2017, p. 76). Whilst teachers strived for a partnered approach in planning learning pathways, parents most often agreed with whatever was proposed. This lack of shared understanding as to the value of the parent voice in linking learning across contexts indirectly impacted on teachers' ability to draw on and utilise families' funds of knowledge. Parents in this way become consumers as opposed to being active contributing participants in assessment.

Striving to get it right: The complexities of collaborative partnerships

Building collaborative partnerships involves a myriad of contributing factors. During the analysis of data in the study, multiple elements were identified that influenced the inclusion of parents as valued partners in their child's journey. The centre was committed to ensuring parent voices were incorporated in their child's assessment. However, the chosen modes of communication, including an aspiration form, informal exchanges and the profile book were all identified as having some limitations. The parent aspiration form, for example, was delivered at a time deemed applicable by the centre. Information collated in these forms provided a focus for teachers in their planning for children's learning. The completion of the aspiration form did not always align with the timings of noticed learning or reflect the naturally evolving and multidirectional aspects of children's learning. This caused tensions for teachers in how they included the parent voice. In spite of both teachers and parents valuing face-to-face catch-ups, the centre did not make available uninterrupted time for these opportunities for exchanges of information that could potentially inform children's learning. The profile book offered another avenue for reciprocal communications; however a lack of parents'

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understanding as to the purpose of assessment documentation and knowledge of their role in the curriculum limited the success of the profile book as a mode for two-way communication.

Teachers' understanding of both internal and external requirements also impacted on the conducting of the assessment of children's learning. Whilst teachers were committed to including parents as partners in decision-making, the pressure to conform to the internal expectations of including the parent voice caused tensions in their professional practice. Teachers reported feeling pressured by the requirements of one story a month, revealing that documentation often reflected learning pathways suggested by the teachers. During the focus group teacher Sam explains, "Sometimes I find that I end up choosing the learning priority because they are at a bit of a loss as to what their role is exactly" (Pennells, 2017, p. 79). Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) discuss the differences in knowledge levels which can result in an imbalance in the power to participate. Teachers taking the lead in this way, together with the passive agreement of parents, consequently led to an inequality in the building of a partnership, with the teacher being seen as expert. Alongside their efforts to adhere to internal requirements of including parent voices in assessment, teachers also reported difficulty in understanding the expectations of external bodies, including the MoE and ERO, in regards to shared decision-making.

Another noted finding was the assumption that some teachers believed some parents were not interested. Teacher interviewee Xanthe comments, "I know a lot of teachers try engaging with parents and try and get their voice… but some parents just aren't interested" (Pennells, 2017, p. 92). This finding was surprising and in direct contrast to the data gathered from parents, illustrating a desire to be connected and involved in their child's learning. A possible contributing factor to this may have been the lack of feedback previously experienced by teachers when trying to gain parent voices. Alongside this, teachers' interpretations of parent responses that reflected minimal understanding of the partnered approach to assessment consequently led teachers to assume that parents were not interested. This assumption unintentionally devalues the parent voice, resulting in missed opportunities for the inclusion of parents in the exchanges of information that inform teaching practices.

The inclusion of the parent voice in the decision-making and assessment process was something teachers strived to get right. During the research process, in both the individual interviews and the teachers' focus group, teachers openly revisited their experiences of involving parents. Evidence of a high level of reflective practice was shown as teachers came to realise the parents' perspective. Teachers identified with parents' unfamiliarity with the curriculum and associated terminology, particularly the terms aspiration and learning priority, were noted as creating barriers to the inclusion of parents. Teacher Chantelle, in the focus group reflects, "It's hard because the words that we are encouraged to use, that are even in *Te Whāriki* or in the curriculum, in general are very educational" (Pennells, 2017, p. 81). Cannella (1997) notes the unchallenged use of the language of childhood can influence parents' power to participate as they try to make sense of their own everyday knowledge of their child and how it fits with the views of others. Similarly, teachers reflected on the timely sharing of assessment information, suggesting personally communicating to parents when new content was added to profile books would assist connectedness. Discussions also arose in regards to reassessing how and when the parent voice is invited and documented, with consideration as to how this influenced learning.

Looking deeper: A discussion of the implications on parents' involvement

In making sense of the views of participants, this study drew on the theoretical concepts of communities of learning and funds of knowledge. The three dimensions of a community of learning as discussed by Wenger (1998) are joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire. In this study, mutual engagement, the process of binding together through collaborative interactions, was supported through informal exchanges during transition times. While these face-to-face communications were appreciated by both parties, it became clear that the multi-tasking nature of the teachers' role often influenced parents' accessibility to this as an opportunity to connect. Assessment

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documentation, in the form of learning stories, offered the potential to be a shared repertoire, a collaboratively developed resource, however parents' unfamiliarity with the assessment process and associated terminology resulted in minimal participation in documentation as a joint site for communicating. This disparity in knowledge levels influenced the power dynamics with the teacher consequently taking up the dominant role. Parent inclusion in the writing of the learning story and engagement with their child's profile book was minimal. Without access to the tools to participate, in this case the language and understanding of the curriculum, parents remain peripheral participants in the assessment process. The acceptance of dominant discourse, such as that relating to assessment, can according to Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2013), constitute boundaries and indirectly contribute to inequalities. Collectively, despite teachers' efforts to build a partnership, these aspects influenced how parents were afforded the power to participate in the processes involved in reaching a common goal, the joint enterprise being their child's learning.

The assessment of children's learning in the centre in this study offered some avenues for the sharing of funds of knowledge. A distributed aspiration form or invitations to share pictorial evidence of families' special events/interests at home provided opportunities for contributions from parents. However, the timing of these did not always align with the learning that was noticed by teachers, resulting in parents being unsure how their contribution made a difference. A parent questionnaire respondent comments, "We have emailed photos…. but they have never been in a learning story" (Pennells, 2017, p. 83). With aspiration forms given out at the teachers' discretion, this impacted the openings for information sharing that was reflective of children's natural progression and multidirectional learning. Informal communications at transition times served as another opportunity, however due to time restraints this information, which was informing of families' funds of knowledge, was often kept in teachers' heads and not shared with other members of the learning community.

Making positive change

At the time this research was conducted, the centre was embarking on an internal review aimed at strengthening partnerships with parents. As a result of the collective findings of both the internal review and this research some changes/adaptions to improve current practices are being implemented.

Ongoing collaborative dialogue targeted at supporting two-way exchanges has led to parents being offered multiple methods of communication including emailing about children's noticed learning, face-to-face exchanges and a visual display of daily centre happenings. A small number of parents and teachers were trialling using online portfolios alongside the hard copies. The aim of this trial is to better understand in what ways parental contributions can be used to enrich the learning opportunities for children. Parent/teacher interviews have been organised to make available uninterrupted time to connect and strengthen the two-way learning conversations between parents and teachers. The language/terminology used in both face-to-face parent-teacher exchanges and in the documentation of assessment is being revised. A focus for this being the use of parent friendly language to support a deeper understanding of the principles of *Te Whāriki*. Feedback is being sought from parents on how information is made available, including how this is distributed and made accessible to be revisited.

This study revealed parents and teachers are keen to work together while holding different knowledge levels. Parents are experts in the contextual knowledge of their child whilst teachers hold pedagogical expertise and are familiar with curriculum and assessment. This disparity in knowledge levels, leading to difficulties for effective communication, and contextual influences shown to impact on parents' power to participate has ongoing implications for teaching teams across the sector. Teachers need to be aware of their unchallenged acceptance of dominant discourse around assessment practices and be mindful of the language used in conducting an assessment. In addition, thought must be given to how the circumstantial factors, such as the types and timings of invitations to contribute in their specific learning context, facilitate and value the inclusion of parents.

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Conclusion

This article has shown that the notion of partnership in sociocultural assessment practices is a complex matter involving multiple influencing factors. A number of differing aspects shaping the inclusion of parents in this process have been contemplated. The findings of the research reported on in this article highlight the importance of effective two-way reciprocal communication and building a shared understanding as to the purpose of parent involvement. In addition, the impact of the service's chosen systems of communication, alongside the influences of both external and internal expectations, are noted as impacting on the opportunities parents have to be included in their child's learning. This article prompts further reflection and discussion on what can be done to strengthen partnerships in assessment practices through genuinely including the parent voice in a way that makes a meaningful difference to children's learning. Whilst the ECE community in Aotearoa New Zealand prides itself with a democratic curriculum, consideration must be given to ensure practices offer equitable opportunities for involvement from all members of the learning community. As a parent participant questioned if "it's such a massive thing for teachers why isn't it a massive thing for us?" (Pennells, 2017, p. 116).

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