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Using activity theory to achieve equitable peer and parent partnerships in early childhood education.

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This article will share some of the findings of a research project I have carried out for my PhD at the University of Auckland, investigating the "wellbeing and belonging of parents who care for a child with additional needs in early childhood education" (Whyte, in press, p. 1). I will describe the workings of activity theory in interaction with the care and education centre's Community of Learners (CoL). The centre community includes the children, the teachers, all parents and whānau (extended family), and support staff. I will then look at the dimensions of the CoL through the activity theory lens, to investigate some of the barriers to participation in the centre curriculum for parents who care for a child who is diagnosed with autism, as well as possibilities for further parent involvement. It is hoped that an understanding of activity theory will help teachers to promote collaborative engagement and sense of belonging for parents within the CoL.

The early childcare and education centre Community of Learners

My research was carried out in a kindergarten in Auckland, in Aotearoa New Zealand, over a period of seven months, after gaining ethics permission for my research through the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. The main focus of the research was to explore the experience and sense of belonging of a set of parents with an autistic child – their only child – who was going through early childhood education. The child was four years and nine months old at the start of the research but stayed at the centre for an extra half year after turning five years old. This research was a qualitative single case study, involving several interviews with the parents, head teacher and service manager of the kindergarten held separately, and interviews with the parents and head teacher together. Regular observations were also carried out in the kindergarten throughout the time period of the research, which was the ethnographic part of the research. Several other tools such as photo stories (Whyte, 2015, 2016) and research diaries were also used to generate data.

Community of Learners is a concept often used in early childhood education to talk about the collaborative engagement of the children, teachers, parents, whānau, and support staff (Ministry of Education, 2004). The concept is closely related to Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998). In early childhood education this concept is generally called Community of Learners because of the focus on children's learning and how the community contributes to mutual engagement in the learning

environment. Wenger (1998) maintains there are three dimensions of practice in a collaborative learning environment: *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise*, and *shared repertoire*. Mutual engagement is obviously about doing things together, but also about enabling this engagement. In an early childhood care and education centre, parents are often dependent on the teachers for this. Therefore, close relationships – primarily with the teachers, but also with other parents – is important for participation. Joint enterprise is important for participation in the CoL, because when people collaborate with others, they develop a sense of ownership and identity. Collaboration also leads to a shared repertoire: a shared point of reference. Participation through mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire work together to create a sense of belonging. Furthermore, participation works in tandem with reification, which are the physical tools used to facilitate participation such as enrolment forms, an invitation to an event, inclusive practice and policies, notices that enable participation, or other tools or instruments (Wenger, 1998). Without the kindergarten (the physical space) for example, or the child being the right age (the physical, written down rules or regulations), there would not be any participation.

A short introduction to activity theory

The early building blocks of activity theory were laid by Vygotsky in the early 20th century. Vygotsky proposes that learning is guided by the objective (the motive) the individual has in mind, spurred on by language in interaction with others and other cultural tools, which then leads to higher cognitive function. For Vygotsky (1978), activity and interactions need to be seen in the context in which the learning takes place. Leontiev (1981), a colleague of Vygotsky, looked deeper into this context of the activity and interactions individuals have with others, by considering different elements of the collaborative activity such as the tools people use and how the rules people adhere to might influence the activity. Different activity systems also impact on each other, an idea attributed to Engeström (1987) who expanded the model by discussing how the activity of the individual (in this case the parent) impacts on other activity systems (other parents and teachers) over time. While Leontiev does not explain how collaboration (the division of labour) transforms the individual's participation, Engeström (1987) looks at how the collaborative activity is mediated by the tools (artefacts, language, resources, and environment), rules (procedures, policies, and norms), and division of labour (expertise, roles, and responsibilities), and mediates between the individual (the parent, who is the subject) and the object (in this case, participation of the parent in the centre), as shown in the diagram below.

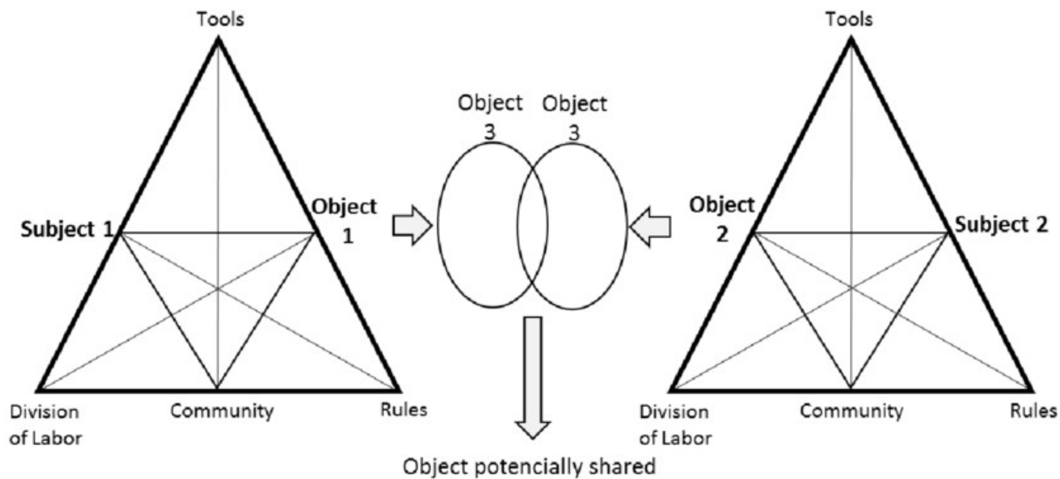

Figure 1: Two interaction activity systems (adapted from Engeström 2001).

Participation in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand

Parent participation in Aotearoa New Zealand is guided by the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum* (*Te Whāriki*) (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). *Te Whāriki* has four principles that can be linked to parent participation: to empower the child in their learning and let the child take a lead in their learning, to work together with the parents and wider family, to form responsive trust relationships between the child and the teacher(s) as well as inclusive relationships with peers and families, and to promote learning that is holistic (MoE, 2017; Whyte & Hendrie, 2023). How the child is supported is important for parents and *Te Whāriki* indicates the wellbeing of the parent is intertwined with the wellbeing of the child. I believe this is especially true when the child has a disability. From observations in my research, it became clear that the mother of the child was very focused on making sure her child was settled and safe, since her child was prone to running out onto the road.

An ethnographic observation (drawn from several observations)

In this ethnographic observation I am describing a typical scenario when Mum was bringing her child (let's call him Sam) to the early childhood care and education centre in the morning. I observed that Mum looked with a worried expression at the door, and at other parents and children holding the door and the subsequent gate open for each other. She asked me if I could keep an eye on Sam once she had left to make sure he would not slip out of the gate to the road. I did not see any interaction between Mum and

the other parents. Instead, she moved Sam quickly through the inside area, past the whiteboard where children put up their names, towards the outdoor space where she knew her child liked the sandpit. After signing in, Mum greeted and engaged with the head teacher or one of the other teachers. I noticed Mum hung up her child's bag. The teachers greeted the child. Sam did not acknowledge the teacher nor any of the other children, but instead wandered off to the sandpit or swing. The child was not prompted to say hello. Instead, the head teacher had a conversation with Mum, while both were looking at the child playing by himself in the sandpit. Once Mum had left for work (typically in a hurry), the child moved to the swing. A younger child pushed the boy, however, there was no response from Sam. After a long turn Sam wandered off towards the slide. In passing he looked at two girls who were making coloured water. Immediately the girl closest to Sam said loudly, "No Sam, no!" and put her hand up in front of his face. A bit shocked by this strong reaction, I suggested to the girl that "instead of just saying 'no' you could perhaps say what he can do" (thinking they might incorporate the boy in their play), to which the girl said, "you can play in the sandpit". A little while later the Education Support Worker (ESW) came and ushered Sam inside to work with him one-on-one, sorting dinosaurs into one basket and trucks into the other. "He does not talk much," she said. "He only says 'no' when he does not want something." I noticed the support teacher's interaction with Sam was quite short and instructional, for example, "put it in there" (while pointing to the basket). No interaction with other children was encouraged. Later, after the ESW was gone, Sam glanced over at a book on planets and, to my surprise, said "eight planets".

Analysing an observation with the help of activity theory

In the scenario described above, we see the Community of Learners in action. The centre community consists of the child (Sam), his parents, other parents, his teachers, his peers, and the ESW. The analysis focuses on one of the parents and her child (either can take up the position of the subject) and their participation in the centre and centre curriculum, which is the object of the analysis. As said before, the parents' and child's participation are intertwined (MoE, 2017), and therefore the analysis will also focus on the child as well as the parent. Interactions between the teachers and the parent (in this case Mum), and interaction between the child and his teachers, the ESW and his peers, benefit the child's learning. Interactions (language) are seen as tools*,* potentially facilitating and increasing participation. By spending time talking with the teacher and sharing the deep understanding Mum has of her child, mutual trust is formed, which is observed by her child who is watching them. These parent-teacher interactions, which take place in what Bronfenbrenner (1979) calls the meso-system (the in-between of the micro system at home and the micro system at the centre), are important as they help the trust relationship between the child and the teacher to form. Once Mum has gone to work, the primary dyad – the strong connection she has with her child – is still there, supported by the teacher. Informal information sharing between Mum and the teacher is an important aspect of the mutual engagement between the parent and the teacher, and therefore participation of the parent in the centre curriculum. With increased participation (mutual

engagement, forming shared understandings), a sense of belonging is formed for the parent. Wenger (1998) explains that the sharing of concerns, successes, and ideas creates a sense of belonging, in this case for the parent, evidenced by the following excerpt:

> They are just lovely … all of them are very lovely, {mentions names of the teachers … and …} they have been very patient with Sam, yes, I've seen them, I've seen them. Yeah. And they would always, I think, especially with {head-teacher} … what I love about her is, whenever I asked her [she says] "No, he's good. He's doing good!" (Mum, Interview 1, 16/8/22).

Brendtro (2006) draws on Bronfenbrenner (1991) who highlighted that "every child needs a teacher who is crazy about him" (p. 163). From this research it occurred to me that the same can be said of the parents. They need understanding too! Seeing teachers' love for their child also builds up trust for the parents.

Moving to a deeper analysis of the scenario, using tools

Language and peer-interactions

As indicated above, the activity in the CoL can be analysed further by looking at the different parts of activity theory. One important aspect that can be considered is what tools (artefacts, language, interactions, resources, and set-up of the environment) are used that have the potential to increase learning and participation (the objective of the activity in the CoL). Verbal and non-verbal language especially are powerful tools for learning for Vygotsky (1978). In Sam's case there is not a lot of interaction going on between him and his peers. Therefore, this important tool for learning is not fully utilised. Conversations between peers lead to shared repertoire and alignment of ideas, which fosters identity and a sense of belonging (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). Instead, Sam's sense of belonging is for a big part built on his engagement with the physical resources in the environment, such as the sandpit. McAnelly (2017) observed autistic children's sense of belonging through intra-action with objects in the environment. Lenz-Taguchi (2010), drawing on Barad (2007), explains that objects can be seen as active agents who trigger a response and therefore active participation. Sam is fascinated by observing the flow of the sand through his hands. In this sense, the sand acts like an intra-active agent for Sam. Therefore, the sandpit, not interactions with his peers, is creating much of Sam's sense of belonging. This finding is important for the parents as it affects the parents' sense of belonging and participation in the centre, as will be further considered in the discussion section below.

Considering the physical tools for learning (resources) in the environment, many interactive (moving) toys are available for Sam in the centre. With language as the most important tool for learning (Sannino et al., 2009; Wenger, 1998), Sam would need support with peer engagement. Otherwise, in terms of the social landscape, he becomes a non-participant, as is evident in the scenario where Sam's peers refer him back to the sandpit and no further interaction was initiated by the children.

Both Mum and Dad have noticed Sam's non-participation, and while both parents are very grateful that Sam found a sense of belonging in the centre, Sam's Dad points out in a joint interview with the head teacher:

> I had the feeling that some children don't really know what to say to him. They're talking about him, like, you know, when a sandcastle has been stamped on, they say "he did it", that kind of thing, but they're not talking to him. (Interview: 21/12/22).

During my ethnographic observations I noticed children's negative perception of Sam. Nearly every time I came to the early childcare and education centre, I noticed children blaming Sam for things he had not done and/or deliberately excluding Sam. Mum has noticed this as well: "I've seen that several times. And I feel bad for Sam." (Interview, 16/8/22). Children form friendships by finding other children with similar interests, belongings, or behaving in a similar way (Puroila et al., 2021). Finding connection (belonging with others) involves a process of identification and differentiation (also called *categorising*) where some members of the CoL are included and some are excluded from the group (Johansson & Puroila, 2021). One way children (people) form a group is by excluding others who are different. This creates a clear boundary that shows who is in, and who is on the outside, of the group (Samuel, 2022; Wenger, 2010). The children in the centre were doing this by calling out, "he is not our friend; he keeps annoying us" (diary notes from ethnographic observation). Teachers try to stop this behaviour by making rules, for example by saying that they are all friends at kindergarten (Watson, 2019), however children often take this as they have to be friends, but they do not have to play with the other child. It is the act of playing, including following the rules of the play, that enables a child to become a member of the group. In the scenario the girl made a 'friendly suggestion for Sam to go and play in the sandpit, thereby avoiding the need to include Sam in their play. One thing a teacher (becoming a tool in the child's learning) could do is support the social interaction between Sam and the two children by drawing on the interests and the strengths of the child (McAnelly, 2017; McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019).

Macartney (2012; 2019) and Cologon (2019) note that negative or *normative attitudes* (from children or adults in the centre) are important barriers to inclusion, and it is these barriers that are especially difficult to address. Attitudes are the social rules people go by. Looking deeper into each part of activity theory, it

becomes clear that rules can be tricky and even contradictory. On one hand, the rules written in the Convention of the Rights for Persons with a Disability (CRPD) (United Nations, 2006) and the statement of National Education and Learning Priorities [NELP] (MoE, 2020) firmly indicate that each child should be included in early childhood education and learning, and their inclusion needs should be supported. On the other hand, social norms and rules see children excluding others to secure their own sense of belonging and membership of a group. Inclusion therefore is trickier to achieve than sense of belonging. While both recognise difference, inclusion requires that these differences be resolved in a way that does not involve potential of exclusion (Kavač & Vaale, 2021).

Other people tools: Education Support Worker (ESW)

In the previous section language was considered as a tool for learning and participation, especially interactions between peers. Apart from the children and teachers at the centre (seen as tools in activity theory), the ESW is another potential tool that can support Sam's learning and participation in the centre. The interaction between the ESW and Sam however does not involve scaffolding interactions with other children in the CoL, as the ESW sees her involvement with Sam as a one-on-one engagement, focusing on teaching him to have eye contact and follow instructions in preparation for primary school. An Individual Development Plan (IDP), another tool, was not drawn up in this instance so the parents have not been asked to share their ideas on the focus of the ESW. Guidelines in Article 24 on Education within the CRPD, however, indicate that working separately with the child on a different lesson plan does not constitute inclusion. It is segregation (United Nations, 2016). Likewise, integration (the physical presence of the child in the centre without extra support, leaving the child to adapt independently) is also not inclusion. Instead, inclusion involves modifying teaching practice to provide an "equitable and participatory learning experience," as well as environment (United Nations, 2016, para 11). Dean (2017) proposes that the ESW could work as one of the teachers, facilitating interactions with other children. This would be a better division of labour, especially while the teachers are busy with supervising the outdoor environment and establishing a relationship with Mum. Looking at the different parts of the activity system, it is interesting to realise that the objective (object) of the Education Support Worker – preparation for primary school through focused one-on-one interactions – was different from the learning objective for the other children in the centre, which is engagement with peers and learning through play (MoE, 2017). It was also different from the parents' motive (object) for their engagement in the research: being able to invite one or more friends for a playdate or to celebrate their child's birthday. Unfortunately, neither of these goals (objects) were achieved during the research.

Other physical tools and routines (rules)

Reflecting on the scenario once more, one could look at the physical tools that are present in the environment that promote engagement and a sense of belonging for each child coming into the centre. These are specific tools that are part of each child's morning routine, that therefore can be seen as an unwritten rule that becomes part of the *shared repertoire* in the centre (Wenger, 1998). First, the child, with their caregiver, goes to the whiteboard inside where children find their name and put it up on the board to show they are present. Then the child and their caregiver greet the teacher, and their friends. After their parent/caregiver has signed in, the child hangs up their bag and has another opportunity to write down their name, this time by a large display board that shows to which primary school each child is expecting to go. In the scenario, these opportunities to socialise and become part of the shared routine (shared repertoire) have not been taken up. Some of the physical tools that could facilitate interaction (mutual engagement) with peers and other parents were not utilised. The reason is that, at this point in time, Mum's focus (object) appears to be on safety. Mum is also making sure that her child is not causing havoc in the inside area, as she knows he is prone to tipping out all the pencils on the floor in passing. Looking closely at the physical tools (for example, the names on the whiteboard indoors), I noticed that the name tag actually had Sam's birth name (let's say this is Jack) written on it instead of the name Sam that the teachers and his peers are using, which is a nickname. Even if Mum would put up his name in passing, it is unlikely his peers would know who the name Jack represents. According to Wenger (2010), a physical tool like a name tag could be used by other members of the CoL (his peers for example) as a bridge to mediate connection between themselves or others and Sam. When tools are not utilised, they become missed opportunities for engagement. Another opportunity was missed at the children's sign-in table under the awning, and yet another one where his name is not showing on the future primary school display board next to the table. The reason for Sam's name and photo not being on this board is because it was not known yet if Sam would go to one of the local primary schools or a special school.

Discussion considering the other parts of the activity system

In the short scenario presented in this article, only a few of the many tools available in the early childhood care and education centre can be identified, and only a short reflection on possible tensions in and between the different parts of the activity system can be discussed. Many of the tools had potential in this scenario to facilitate further interactions between Sam and his peers, facilitating mutual engagement and a *shared repertoire*. Including Sam could help his peers to get a better understanding of how to interact with Sam and how to respond to his needs. The vision of the early childhood curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand around inclusion is to provide "equitable opportunities for learning, irrespective of gender, ability, age, ethnicity or background" and "treating others fairly and including them in play" (MoE, 2017, p. 37). The tension between this vision, which is in line with international and centre policy rules on

inclusion (MoE, 2017; United Nations, 2006, 2016), and the normative rules of children at play and families in our society is clear. Despite the many tools available in the centre to facilitate interactions, opportunities to develop friendships and community for Sam and his parents were limited, even though both Sam and his parents developed a sense of belonging in the centre through the physical environment and a good relationship with the teachers. Mum explained:

> Sam hasn't attended any birthday parties in that kindy. But we did tell … {the head teacher}: It's because we don't want Sam to also ruin the birthday because he would shout because he doesn't like noises so he would cover his ears. (Interview, 16/8/22).

Dad adds:

> You would always get that feeling that people are, you know, not really judging, but they would get the sense that, okay, this … "the other kid" ... was disruptive…
>
> So we told … {the head teacher} that, if there's a birthday party, you let us know, we will pick up Sam early. So that was what was happening... (Interview, 16/8/22).

These excerpts show that Sam's parents are aware of negative judgements in society. Jack (2016) and Weastell (2017) agree that witnessing their child missing out, and being judged as naughty by the other children and their parents (Interview 1 with head teacher), as well as the parents themselves being judged as having bad parenting skills, is very stressful for parents. As a result, the parents opted out of all centre events (the Christmas party, a farewell party of one of the teachers, a disco, excursions, or birthdays at the centre). The contradiction between inclusive policies, and normative judgements and exclusion by children and adults in the centre, led Sam's parents to self-exclude with very little opportunity to get to know other parents or organise a playdate for their son. Connor and Berman (2019) explain it is often through children's birthday parties that parents get to know other parents and participate in the centre community, but for this family the community stayed very small.

In terms of division of labour (who could contribute to support the parents and child's participation in the CoL), it was hard for the teachers to provide extra support for the parents outside the centre. Apart from introducing the parents to one other parent with children diagnosed with autism, and whose time was limited, the parents did not really get to know any other parents. Hence, the Community of Learners in terms of division of labour was not fully utilised to support the parents. The head teacher was careful not

to overstep any boundaries by encroaching on Sam's parents' privacy. After all, according to Education Council New Zealand's *Our code, our standards* (2017), the focus of the collaborative partnerships with parents is squarely on planning and learning. For social support, parents are often referred to outside agencies. While attending a course at Autism New Zealand was useful for the parents, where they learned they were not alone and learned more about autism, this did not help the parents form connections *within* the centre community. The United Nations (2016) inform that lack of reaching out to parents and supporting them to become involved in the centre community, could reinforce stereotypes and misplaced fears that inclusion of children with disabilities will negatively impact on the quality of the education. Therefore, for parents who have a disabled child, a move to equitable parent partnerships is needed that considers a variety of tools and the division of labour, to foster the parents' and their child's participation and belonging, as well as engaging in open discussion and reflection with the Community of Learners on how normative barriers to inclusion could be reduced.

Conclusion

This article has explored how different aspects of activity theory can support participation for parents in a care and education centre's Community of Learners. Since research shows that negative attitudes and normative judgements are the biggest barriers to inclusion (Cologon, 2019; Macartney, 2019), affecting the parents and their child alike, teachers could consider which tools are underused in the centre community that could be activated to foster mutual engagement. Teachers may deliberate how other members of the CoL could be invited to participate and which rules need to be challenged. An in-depth reflection of the different aspects of the activity system could not only uncover contradictions between different rules adhered to in the centre, such as contradictions between inclusive policies and societal norms, but also opposing motives and objectives of different stakeholders. Working towards the same objective promotes collaborative engagement and a shared point of reference, which fosters an increased sense of belonging for parents who have a disabled child, and with that, equitable partnerships and inclusive practice in early childhood education.

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