Can we create a theoretical framework that integrates the roles of parent-teacher partnership?

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Parent teacher partnership, parent-teacher collaboration, parent involvement, parent–teacher relationships, parent teacher interactions, whanaungatanga are all different terminologies used in early childhood education and in educational sector as a whole. This paper focuses on the relationships between parents and teachers in early childhood settings and how this relationship has the potential to improve learning outcomes for children.

**Introduction**

The notion of partnership is very ambiguous, problematic and complex though it is a feature of early childhood education philosophy and practice (Hedges & Lee, 2010; Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, Chud & Lange, 1998; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 1992). So what is partnership? As described by Henry, (1996) and in Keyes (2002), partnership is a dance where each partner responds to the others’ cues through subtle communication. The framework for interaction, based on research and theories, views parents as essential and not merely desirable. It recognizes the significance of families and schools. Partnership is based on the premise of common interest of the child, his/her improved educational outcomes (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 1992; Todd & Higgins, 1998) and family well-being (Munford, Sanders, Maden & Maden, 2007). Parent involvement in school is believed to have a positive effect on children’s academic progress, increased social skills, better study habits and school attendance and attitudes (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 1992). Furthermore, parent teacher relationships are even more critical where parents and teachers come from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds (Bernhard et al., 1998).

**Parent-teacher partnership**

In her paper, Keyes relates to previous research on the importance of parent-teacher partnerships including the factors that affect the development of effective relationships. Keyes also proposes a framework that integrates the dynamics of interaction and skills through communication to bridge the differences that exist within the complexity of relationships. Effective relationships are founded on an understanding of how parents and teachers construct their roles in complementing each other and also subsequently modifying these roles through negotiations that reflect the unique needs of both partners. Open two-way communication where parents and teachers educate each other, creates mutually responsive relationships that are likely to flourish when parents and teachers focus on their commitment to children’s learning outcomes. The diversity in teachers’ and parents’ cultures and values includes their race, ethnicity, language socio-economic class and educational levels, beliefs and attitudes, the societal forces such as technology, workplace
characteristics, and changing family structures affecting effective partnerships. Keyes tells us to be aware of how parents and teachers view collaboration while constructing and enacting their roles.

**Partnerships in diverse or disadvantaged relationships**

Parent teacher partnerships become more complex when there is a diversity of cultures. This is particularly noticeable in an ethno-culturally diverse population, where the dominant mainstream culture is the white culture. Relationships are built into the context of people, places, customs, and attitudes (Ministry Of Education [MoE], 1996, p.43). Similarly relationships in early childhood between parents and teachers are reflected within this social context.

Qualitative and quantitative research by Bernhard et al. (1998) in three immigrant influx cities in Canada addresses the challenge of parent teacher communication in diverse child care centres. Findings showed that the dominance of majority culture over the disadvantaged minority (immigrant) culture, was influenced by societal structure. As an example the ‘expert’ model in early childhood in North America was seen as prominent in the response of administrators and teachers who were responsible for educating families in universal patterns of child-rearing and development. When teachers and immigrant parents interacted there emerged strong racial barriers. The research concluded that troubled relationships were due to the structure of the early childhood system, creating misunderstandings and miscommunication through cultural differences, beliefs and language barriers. Diversity it was seen needs to be accepted and mutually accommodated within mainstream values. Communication on issues of diversity was seen as critical to the success of partnerships in these diverse societies.

Racism is another deterrent that prevents parents from minorities participating in communities. The shortcomings of this research have been highlighted by the researchers themselves who have commented that despite a large number of studies, the design of the partnership did not allow for multiple perspectives. However the researchers suggest a more collaborative model for ECE could improve communications, problem-solving and ensure diversity is honoured beyond words and realized in practice. Recent research tells us that Canada has had some success in developing a culture where parents can be seen as equal partners. The work in Canada is based on the socio-early cultural aspect rather than the deficit/expert model (Tretjack, 2010-11).

Like disadvantaged children/families in Canada, New Zealand faces a similar situation. Poverty labels families and children as disadvantaged. Research undertaken by, Ritchie and Rau (2006) using collaborative and narrative mythologies and the Kaupapa Māori research models, have through purposive sampling looked into factors that help raise the status of Māori children. They suggest that whānau participation is central to child development in the Māori world view and for this, building strong relationships with teachers are important. There are many successful programmes that intervene early in the lives of children and families to promote positive childhood outcomes such as Parents as First Teachers (PAFT) (Farquhar, 2003), and Community based programmes such as, Te Aroha Noa Te Aroha Noa where families and whānau have been blended into the community. These educational programmes encourage, parent
skills and knowledge through quality education in partnership. Though these community-based programmes, the benefits of supporting vulnerable or disadvantaged families add funds of knowledge to the community of learning, although their survival depends on social policy (Munford et al., 2007). Debate continues with at one end of the spectrum, family/whānau support being considered integral to early childhood curriculum but on the other end of the spectrum, government education policy such as the 80% - 100% qualified teachers in centre based programmes effectively restricting whānau participation.

Looking at this from the Treaty perspective, Article One of both the Māori and English versions of The Treaty, we find that the government (crown) has a right to make decisions and requirements in this matter (Ministry for culture and Heritage, 2011). Besides considering that Ako is founded on the principle of Partnership (MoE 1996, 2012), the government’s right to set these requirements takes precedence over the family and communities focus. Also, these community-based programmes being resilient and adaptable will continue to survive as long as the community feels they are beneficial (Munford et al, 2007). Who then has the power and who has the power in the parent-teacher partnership?

Professionals are people who have an in-depth specialized knowledge, skill and understanding of their profession. They make ethical and informed judgments in the best interest of their clients and are goal oriented. Similarly, teachers who have a deep knowledge of children’s theories of learning, follow a code of ethics and professional standards (Spodek, Saracho & Peters, 1988). In their paper Todd and Higgins (1998) discuss some ways in which structuring of home-school relationships around power leads to particular difficulties and complexities along with the limitations of the notion of partnership. They challenge the dichotomy of parents as powerless and professionals as powerful. Similarly, Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) discuss communication strategies through which the implication of parents’ position as ‘others’ in a parent teacher relationship can be challenged.

**Conclusion**

Family/whānau support, involvement and development has the potential to improve a child’s educational outcomes. A nation that looks after its youngest citizens, the children, by providing them with food, clothing, education, financial and emotional security, benefits as a whole in the future. However, there are barriers to successful family/whānau participation in their children’s education, and these have been identified by a number of studies. Crucial to the process of overcoming these barriers is the recognition that as educators, teachers are in positions of power and influence, responsible for initiating change towards more democratic, culturally inclusive practices. Conversely partnership without flexibility will reflect hierarchical power structures and prevent the development of equitable relationships.

Educators must be mindful of the fact that as outsiders who are not experts in ‘other’ cultures, they have a task of building bridges that will strengthen relationships. Change can be brought about not by agreeing but by teachers challenging their own perception of ‘truth’ and questioning the dominant norms.
Teachers have to embrace the politics of knowledge, the consensus and dissensus that underpin parent teacher relationships and to rethink parent-staff relationships. This in turn it is hoped will create greater equity in ECE. Educators need to find ways of developing communications that are inclusive and respectful to create equitable staff parent relationships. Through collaborative partnership and communication these recommendations can assist the cause while research has shown that there is no conclusive formula to achieve this.

References


