

Research Note

What Makes a Teacher-Parent and Family Partnership?

Bill Hagan and Lindy Austin
Manukau Institute of Technology

Marianne Mudaliar
Counties Manukau Kindergarten Association

Key words: academic-practitioner partnership, family involvement, parent-teacher communication, action-based research

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher-parent and family partnerships within two kindergarten settings. Working with families is one of the most important aspects of being an early childhood professional, but it is an area that teachers receive little preparation for (Nieto, 2004). This exploratory study focussed on improvement of parent-teacher relationships at two kindergartens. An academic-practitioner partnership was formed to provide support to teachers in undertaking action research. Action-based research was thought to provide a useful approach for the teachers to investigate a range of value attributes such as participation, partnerships and connectedness with families and communities. As a result of their action-based research, the teachers realised that having sound relationships with parents and whānau (including extended family members) necessarily underpinned all educational conversations.

Introduction

During 2007 professional practice managers of the Counties Manukau Kindergarten Association organised two professional development hui (meetings) for their kindergarten staff. The role of the professional practice managers is to guide and mentor the kindergarten staff in their area. Included in the first programme was a presentation about the Ministry of Education funded Centre of Innovation action research project led by staff from a local kindergarten and supported by research associates from the Manukau Institute of Technology. At the second hui, two early childhood staff from the same Institute presented an overview of action research and a workshop was also presented which helped to define some of the issues for individual kindergartens.

At that hui, staff from two kindergartens indicated their interest in participating in an exploratory action research project to focus on improving partnership with parents and families (whānau) in their kindergartens. They considered they were inadequately prepared to work with families from diverse backgrounds (Nieto, 2004), yet this was a necessary part of their daily job. In her study of parent education and support through early childhood centre networks Thesing (2008) argues that equal status within a relationship is successful

when it occurs on an informal basis between parents and staff. The staff did not consider that there was equal status between themselves and parents.

The Counties Manukau Kindergarten Association which ran the two kindergartens reported in this study, identified a need for research with regard to professional development that lent itself to in-depth investigation, research and application to the kindergarten association, and then to the wider early childhood community. This will be discussed further in this paper.

The teachers from the two kindergartens and two researchers from Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) (Bill Hagan and Lindy Austin) agreed to work together and carry out this initial project, each contributing some resourcing from the Association's budget as well as from MIT in order to facilitate action research capability.

Project Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this exploratory study, involving academic-practitioner partnership in action-based research, was to focus on improvement of parent-teacher relationships at two kindergartens. The research questions guiding the action research were different for each kindergarten. At Kindergarten 1 the research questions were: (a) How does parent involvement increase their awareness of how children learn through play? and (b) How does parent involvement in the programme make parents understand that play is important for children in the early years? At Kindergarten 2 the research question was: Does increasing parental awareness and participation in the kindergarten programme through conversations regarding children's portfolios of work have the potential to nurture a culture of partnership?

Methodology

The developmental action research model developed by Cardno (2003) was used as it was developed for studies such as this one that involve practitioner-academic researcher collaboration. Action research as a methodological approach allows for practitioners to discover more about key issues of partnership with a larger community of practice (and this may include working with academics). Action research also allows for the identification of influences on teaching practices.

The following values were adopted at the outset of the project and guided the action research: participation, partnership, and connectedness. These values covered the involvement of family and whānau as much as possible and academic and practitioner researchers.

Reflection on teaching and learning for the practitioner researchers was inherent in the action research spiral (Cardno, 2003). Critical reflection, which enables researchers to investigate and challenge assumptions and extend their thinking, was a core aspect of this investigation (Austin, 2009a). Within the framework of action research, the practitioner researchers gained more confidence as emergent researchers through sharing their different forms of expertise, a process that Meade (2007) calls 'lateral capacity building'.

Sample

Both kindergartens were located in Auckland South and drew from culturally, socially and geographically diverse communities. Each had three NZ Teachers' Council registered teachers and support staff. Families represented a diversity of ethnicities: Māori, Pacific Islanders, Asian, European, Middle Eastern, and Indian. Over half of the families had English as a second language.

Method

The academic-researchers guided the practitioner-researchers through each of the following research steps:

- Each kindergarten identified a difficulty they had pertaining to partnering with parents.
- A research question was generated and a topic literature review was developed by the practitioner-researchers at each kindergarten. Some of the key readings pertinent to this study were supplied to them by the academic partners, and supplemented by teachers accessing relevant literature such as academic journals. The methods of data collection were decided upon, these included staff reflective journals, focussed observations, surveys for children and digital photo records. Written and visual documentation [photographs] was based on each kindergarten's specific research question.
- At each kindergarten the key carer who attended with the child at kindergarten from ten families and with whom the practitioner-researchers wanted to develop a better relationship with, were selected.
- Baseline data was collected from each staff member as to all parent initiated or staff initiated contact along with a comment as to what it was about, e.g. if it was in regards to a brief question of how the day went in one instance or a more in depth discussion about their child's participation. One kindergarten also reported on whether there was a focus on children's play and the learning that developed from it in their conversations.

Kindergarten 1

The methods of data collection were:

- A survey of the parents of ten families who were not involved and did not show interest in participating in the kindergarten programme or wider activities. From the teacher's perspective these parents/families appeared to be shy, reticent, withdrawn and less confident within the early childhood setting.
- The staff encouraged all children to participate in the play survey, but only data from the ten targeted families was used. In discussion with the children, the practitioner researchers completed a Likert scale survey that focussed on happy and sad faces to indicate how the children perceived their play experiences. This provided a discussion topic to share with the targeted families.
- The teachers made a concerted effort to talk with the parents of the targeted families. (Note that before the study staff conversations with these parents were often limited to how the child was that morning or how the child got on during the session). These discussions were recorded under the headings of who initiated the interaction and whether there was a 'play' theme in the discussions.

Action Cycle 1: As a result of this data gathering, the teachers were now more conscious of the need to be proactive to build relationships and partnerships with parents overall. The teachers realised they had to be more proactive and initiate interaction with the parents. The assumption that they previously held was that parents would approach them because they were the teachers. This proved to be incorrect because they were now being invited to participate in the kindergarten community through the teachers deliberately using strategies to initiate interactions. Unintentionally, the teachers may have been less responsive to these families.

A noticeable change in the parent/teacher relationships was that parents initiated interactions. For example a parent who previously would rush into the kindergarten, drop off her son and rush out without any interaction with the staff now said hello and good-bye to the staff. She rang the staff concerns related to her son which was a big breakthrough in communication because previously she had not raised any concerns.

The teachers were now very conscious of unintentionally making assumptions about the 10 families. For example, Anna was perceived as a pushy parent but the teachers changed their perception of her. This was a breakthrough for the teachers. During a kindergarten luncheon, Anna shared how anxious she was for her son to do well at kindergarten because she had not had such an opportunity in her country of birth and the teachers now understood where she was coming from.

Action Cycle 2: The research focus for cycle 2 had been refined through discussion and analysis of the data by the research team and built on the increased parent and family participation through meaningful conversations with a play focus. These strategies had the potential to enhance parent/teacher partnership even further. Analysis of staff reflective diaries and discussion logs helped to underscore this.

Kindergarten 2

The methods of data collection were family and child surveys and teacher records of interaction (similar to Kindergarten 1), with a focus on a 'portfolio theme' in the discussion where possible. Thematic analysis of developing conversations with the families who participated was then completed.

Action Cycle 1: The research tool in regards to increasing parent participation was about initiating and responding to the children's portfolios in order to develop conversations about children's learning. All 90 families were invited to participate in the surveys. Twenty-five out of the 90 families returned the surveys and their children were targeted to participate in the partnership surveys. Additionally there were teacher partnership discussions.

The teachers made a concerted effort to interact with the families who had returned the survey. They attempted to incorporate the portfolio theme into the discussion where possible. Similar to kindergarten 1, the teachers recorded the discussions under the headings of who initiated the interaction and whether there was a portfolio theme in the discussion. This was recorded to ascertain whether the targeted parents felt more comfortable to discuss educational issues with the staff. Additionally they implemented strategies to remind the parents to return the surveys, for example, they had a draw for all of the returned surveys.

Action Cycle 2: The staff of kindergarten 2 realised that their emphasis on portfolios was unintentionally impeding the interactions and relationships with families. For this cycle, the staff decided that by building on increased family participation through meaningful conversations, partnerships could be further nurtured. Over time the staff noticed that there were more parent initiated interactions than teacher initiated. Specific educational questions from the parents increased and were varied. Now some were about the portfolios and their contributions. Teacher reflections and discussions led the staff to question whether the deliberate change in interactions with parents and families become transformative in promoting collaborative relationships.

Initial Findings

At Kindergarten 1 as a result of the action research the teachers had become more proactive in initiating conversations with parents and other family members. The teacher-researchers were more aware of the need to initiate conversations. They noticed that a positive spin-off of this was that the children from the ten target families were talking more and making more verbal contributions during their time in the kindergarten programme.

At Kindergarten 2 the teachers found that discussions around children's portfolios of learning helped to enhance interactions, particularly in relation to parent's questions and interest. The deliberate attempt to encourage more conversations about learning, initially from the teachers, seemed to create more opportunities for developing mutual interests in the child's developing competence and capabilities. Importantly, parent initiated conversations then increased in response to this.

Discussion and Conclusion

The teachers previously realised that having sound relationships with parents and whānau underpinned all educational conversations. They had assumed that relationships with parents and whānau just occurred and were not always reciprocal. The teachers also noticed that children were verbally contributing more in the sessions as an outcome of being proactive and initiating discussion with family and whānau. Often the parents and/or whānau would respond but not build on conversations initiated by the kindergarten staff. This can relate to modelling the language of the teacher, as well as developing skills or 'repertoires' of interaction (Hagan, 2007), that in turn supports parent involvement. They are now complying with the Ministry of Education (1996) view that staff in early childhood centres should regard parents and whānau as partners. These changes of relationships were evident in staff reflections and parent feedback.

An example of this relates to the use of portfolios as a tool of engagement discussed in Kindergarten 2. As the intervention progressed the staff noted an increase of interest by the parents in their children's portfolios. The parents appeared more confident in responding, both verbally and by writing comments in them. Another New Zealand Ministry of Education funded action research project (Centre of Innovation) at an Auckland kindergarten looked at the use of portfolios. The research established that portfolios were useful as one tool of communication to foster an inclusive environment and can open up new ways of supporting relationships and learning (Glass, Baker, Bernstone & Hagan, 2008). At Kindergarten 2, the portfolios were used as tools of communication because the children and their families were keen to take them home to share with the extended family. This developing collaboration, in regards to the portfolios, fostered discussions about children's learning.

Creating a culture of partnership reflects the importance of noticing, recognising, and responding to diversity and also acknowledgement of 'family capital' from a more credit based perspective, not a deficit based perspective. This has also enhanced teacher relationships with children (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

Strengthening a sense of connectedness between families and kindergarten can become transformative (Gibbs, 2006), promoting collaborative relationships between children, their families and teachers. Teachers in Kindergarten 1 initiated a new orientation programme with new parents/whānau as a result of this investigation. Seamless pathways between home and the early childhood centre can help children be themselves and see education as normal

according to Erb (2008). To quote Kirmani (2007) “Families from diverse backgrounds can be allies in creating a culturally inclusive learning environment” (p.98).

In foreseeable and recurring ways, and within everyday activities and experiences, children’s knowledge, theories, fantasies and interests are stimulated by the diversity found in family experiences. The interconnectedness, between children’s knowledge and experiences in relation to the diversity of cultural backgrounds, was a concept discussed and developed by Moll (as cited in Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). This concept, ‘funds of knowledge’, demonstrates that all children bring meanings from their homes and communities (Hedges, 2007). Teacher awareness of the diversity of family experiences in the kindergartens was enriched by the enhanced relationships. An evidenced-informed approach to teacher practice suggests that data such as teacher and family life experiences, that is not strictly research-based, legitimately enters into educational decision-making within teacher practice (Pring, 2004, cited in Hedges, 2007, p. 203). This was evidenced by the staff reflections at a follow-up meeting held for all kindergarten staff in the association.

Austin (2009b) states that in their reflections, teachers found many links which have enhanced their professional learning and transformed practice in their developing partnerships with parents. Partnership also strengthens an inquiry focus in pedagogical relationships with children, and an awareness of funds of knowledge in early childhood contexts (Hedges, 2007). As stated by one of the professional practice managers for the kindergarten staff who acted as an observer and informant in regards to supporting this research.

Teacher awareness and intuitiveness has been heightened, their interactions with parents have improved, and there are more frequent conversations and interactions especially with shy, hesitant parents. Teachers are taking a ‘more intimate, close up view’ at what parents are feeling, saying and wanting to contribute.

References

- Austin, L. (2009a). Developing critical self-reflection: A personal journey. Unpublished thesis, Charles Darwin University, Northern Territory, Australia.
- Austin, L. (2009b). Reflective teaching strategies for a reflective educator. In A. Gibbons & C. Gibbs (Eds). *Conversations on early childhood teacher education* (pp.160-166). Redmond, WA: World Forum Foundation.
- Cardno, C. (2003). *Action research: A developmental approach*. Wellington, NZ: NZCER.
- Christian, L. (2007). Understanding families: Applying family systems theory to early childhood practice. In Koralek, D. (Ed.). *Spotlight on young children and families* (pp.4-11). Washington, DC: national Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Erb, W. (2008). The family of learners. *New Zealand Education Gazette* (8 September). Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Gibbs, C. (2006). *To be a teacher: Journeys towards authenticity*. Auckland: Pearson Education.
- Glass, B., Baker, K., Ellis, R., Bernstone, H. & Hagan, B. (2008). Documenting for Inclusion: How do we create an inclusive environment for all children? *Early Childhood Folio* 12, 36-40.

- Gonzalez, N., Moll, L.C., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing practices in household, communities, and classrooms*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hagan, B. (2007). Case Studies from the New Entrant classroom: Children's developing repertoires of participation. *NZ Research in Early Childhood Education* 10, 95-104.
- Hedges, H. (2007). *Funds of knowledge in early childhood communities of inquiry*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North, NZ.
- Kirman, M. (2007). Empowering culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. *Young Children*, (November), 94-98.
- Meade, A. (2007). *Cresting the waves: Innovation in early childhood education*. Wellington, NZ: NZCER Press.
- Nieto, S. (2004). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education 4th ed.* New York: Allyn & Bacon.
- Pring, R. (2004). *Philosophy of educational research, 2nd ed.* London: Continuum.

Acknowledgements

The initial version of this paper was presented at the 2009 New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Symposium, Wellington. Ethics approval was granted by the Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) Research Ethics Committee. This exploratory study was a partnership between MIT and staff of Alfriston Rd. Kindergarten: Dian Tuffey, Tina Chand & Trisha Thompson and Conifer Road Kindergarten: Monie Prosser, Heather Shoebridge & Vicky Hill.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bill Hagan is Principal Lecturer Research in the School of Education at Manukau Institute of Technology with research interests in inclusive education, practice based research and field based early childhood teacher education. Lindy Austin is Head of School in Education in the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences with research interests in transformative education. Marianne Mudaliar is with the Counties Manukau Kindergarten Association.