Partnerships in early childhood education: Engaging families in professional conversations

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Simone Griggs was a kindergarten teacher and educator in Melbourne and Tasmania for over 10 years before she joined ACER as a Research Officer. She has extensive experience in planning, coordinating and implementing government-funded kindergarten programs and has led a diverse team of educators to use evidence-based teaching strategies to support inclusion in their preschool programs. Simone has liaised with allied health professionals and provided individualised support to children by building strong connections with families and other stakeholders and, to support this practice, completed a Masters in Learning Intervention from the University of Melbourne in 2022. During her studies, Simone conducted an extensive literature review and research in partnerships between families and early childhood educators. This research has evolved with a focus on family-centred care and the development of resources for educators. Simone has considerable mentoring experience through participating in the Effective Mentoring Program in Victoria and the University of Melbourne's peer mentor program.

Greta Rollo leads the Primary Early Childhood and Inclusive Research team. This team engages policymakers, school leaders and educators in the development of research-informed policies and practices in the early years (birth to 8 years). Greta leads and contributes to domestic and international projects developing tools and approaches that support improved learning (assessment rubrics, learning progressions, observational assessments, and personalised learning and support processes) across critical areas of early development including social and emotional learning, oral language, fundamental movement skills and self-regulation. She has led projects to evaluate educational programs and policy initiatives and is interested in using research to inform personalised learning and support. Greta's current research interests include using music pedagogy to enhance engagement and learning in early years settings.

Abstract

Effective monitoring of learning and development involves integrating multiple perspectives from a child's parents, carers, family, and their educators. A collaborative approach between educators and families not only recognises the family's critical importance in their child's life but it has also been shown to benefit children with learning difficulties, delays and behavioural concerns (Parenting Research Centre, 2012; Prior et al., 2011). Efforts made towards the integration of multiple perspectives can also support stronger inclusion of diverse families into communities of early childhood education and care. However, discussions with parents and carers about issues regarding their children's development can be a challenging part of an educator's role (O'Connor et al., 2018). This paper will reveal both obstacles and enablers when it comes to engaging in conversations with parents and caregivers. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory positions 'mutuality, reciprocity and shared decision-making' (1979, p. 46) at the forefront of planning for conversations about the learning and development of young people. This paper will justify how this lens has informed the development of a tool to support educators and families to move beyond traditional power imbalances to enhanced and balanced relationships that result in improved holistic student support.

Introduction

Simone Griggs and Greta Rollo offer Masterclass 1, 'Partnerships: A guiding resource to use when approaching professional conversations with families and carers'. The National Quality Framework (NQF) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) ask educators to form 'respectful supportive relationships' with families (NQS Standard 6.1). This Masterclass uses a workshop-style to focus on developing partnerships between educators and families using a supportive resource that can help educators approach conversations regarding concerns about students learning and development. The workshop is an opportunity to build and explore applied theories, including family-centred care, ecological systems theory, social exchange theory and apply these to practice using integrated tools and approaches to build and maintain trusting partnerships with parents. The following paper forms the theoretical background of Masterclass 1 and informs development of the resources upon which the Masterclass is based.

The enduring impact of early learning experiences

The quality of a child's early experiences in life has a significant and enduring impact on their academic and social-emotional skill development (McCain et al., 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). During this extremely important period of development, a child's motivational disposition is formed and if this development is not adequately supported, a child's formal learning and academic achievement may be hindered (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). A report by the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, Australia (2011) highlights the vital role that families play in promoting children's early brain development. Findings from this report conclude that by the time a child is 3 years old, 90% of their brain has already developed – therefore the relationships and environments that a child is exposed to in the early years are of critical neurological importance. The children of families who take an active part in their early learning service — which includes close relationships with educators — achieve greater educational outcomes (McDermott, 2010), irrespective of their socioeconomic level, ethnic or racial background, or their parents schooling level. This indicates that children are much more likely to reach their full potential when their family and early childhood education and care services (ECEC) work together.

Relationships between ECEC educators and families are critical

Research stresses that fostering strong relationships between early childhood educators and families improves education, health and wellbeing outcomes for children (Ashton et al., 2008; Epstein, 2011; Jinnah & Walters, 2008; Knopf & Swick, 2006; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009; Tayler, 2006). Multiple studies of early years programs designed to promote communication between parents and educators, show that successful partnerships can boost children's academic and social-emotional skill development (Bierman et al., 2017; Fenech, 2013; Lang et al., 2016). Collaborative approaches to early intervention have also been shown to benefit children with learning difficulties, developmental delays and behavioural concerns (Parenting Research Centre, 2012; Prior et al., 2011). Such research demonstrates that partnerships between families and educators in ECEC have the potential to optimise the trajectory of all children's development, resulting in timely referrals to allied health services and more positive holistic outcomes for children.

Teachers' and educators' continuous monitoring of learning and development in these crucial years can allow timely identification and support of young children experiencing developmental challenges (Mozolic-Staunton et al., 2017; Mozolic-Staunton et al., 2021). Such monitoring involves integrating

multiple perspectives from a child's parents, family, friends, health carers and educators (Mozolic-Staunton et al., 2021). By linking observations from their home environments with their education environments (Mozolic-Staunton et al., 2017), it is possible to holistically identify a child's strengths, abilities and learning needs. This research can be used to inform and strengthen partnerships.

An Australian study by Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) explores partnerships between educators and families but identifies that while ECEC educators understand the importance of establishing strong relationships with parents, developing these partnerships can be challenging and complex. This finding is reinforced by Mahmood (2013) who reveals that educators often feel unqualified when asked to respond to sensitive issues such as concerns about a child's learning and development. Comparable evidence in a study by O'Connor et al. (2018) found that discussions with parents about their children's development continued to be a difficult part of an educator's role, even when educators had several years' experience. Despite understanding the importance of partnerships with families, educators can struggle to establish and maintain these relationships and further research in this area is needed.
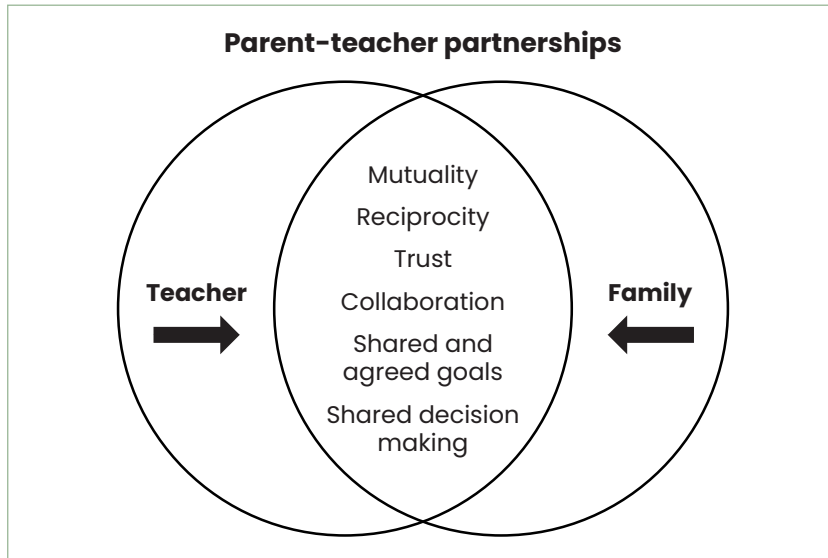
Research into partnerships is needed to support ECEC educators

This paper identifies the gaps in existing research regarding educator and parent partnerships with a particular focus on supporting early childhood educators to collaborate with families. This includes how difficulties in learning and development are identified and how educators raise and respond to families' concerns about a child's learning and development. This paper develops a theoretical grounding for the creation of a tool that supports professional conversations that build and sustain educator and parent partnerships. Partnerships are defined with reference to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Homan's social exchange theory. Lastly, current research on the benefits and challenges of collaborative partnerships between educators and families is discussed.

Despite educators understanding the importance of creating strong partnerships with families, there are challenges in forming and maintaining these relationships (Fenech, 2013; Lang et al., 2016; Nitecki, 2015). This may be due to uncertainty in the literature about how educator–parent partnerships can be defined. Literature from educational sources notes that the term 'partnerships' is often used interchangeably with terms such as 'parent involvement' (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Zellman & Perlman, 2006) and 'parent engagement' (Douglass, 2011). Driessen et al. (2005) suggests this ambiguity in the definition of partnerships results in ambiguity between families and ECEC educators. For the purposes of this paper, Bronfenbrenner's definition of partnerships will be considered together with key principles of Homan's social exchange theory.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory recognises 3 environments through which a child's development occurs: the interactions they have with their caregivers, family and friends; their participation in early childhood services; and the cultural values of their community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory recognises that parents and caregivers should be supported and empowered to engage in decision-making about their child (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Bronfenbrenner (1979) also identifies 3 critical concepts that contribute to the framework for strong partnerships: 'mutuality, reciprocity and shared decision-making' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.46). He suggests that mutuality assumes a common understanding shared by both parties (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rouse, 2014). While Rouse describes reciprocity as a 'two-way process which is both causal and influential on the interactions between the partners' (Rouse, 2014, p.47). Trusting relationships only occur when both mutuality and reciprocity are present (Rouse, 2014) because 'when there is a balance of power in a relationship, reciprocal trust, collaboration and shared decision-making between educators and parents is more likely to occur' (p. 47). The model presented in Figure 1 recognises the critical concepts that contribute to effective partnerships.

Figure 1   Partnerships between educators and families

Parent-teacher partnerships

Mutuality
Reciprocity
Trust
Collaboration
Shared and
agreed goals
Shared decision
making

Teacher

Family

Source: Bronfenbrenner (1979)

Trust is at the forefront of effective partnerships

While the ecological perspective rationalises the importance of partnerships, it does not explain the motivation for parents and services to work collectively (Halgunseth et al., 2009). Social exchange theory may provide insight into how social partnerships develop and are maintained. According to this theory, relationships develop depending on the exchange of resources between participants and the weighing of costs and benefits (Halgunseth et al., 2009). Halgunseth et al. (2009) also describe how perceived resources or benefits can be tangible (for example, adult education courses) or intangible (for example, warm, welcoming environments). The concept of trust is also at the core of social exchange theory. As mutual trust develops between the family and the educators so will the extent and commitment to the partnership (Early, 1992; Lopez, et al., 2004; Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). If trust is lost, however, the commitment to the relationship will begin to diminish (Early, 1992; Lopez, et al., 2004; Nakonezny & Denton, 2008).

Murphy et al. (2021) sought to understand parents' experiences of collaborative practice within Australian ECEC services and to explore educators' confidence in collaborating with families. Likert scale data was collected through online surveys and focus groups with 318 educators and 265 parents. Results from the study revealed that 90% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they were 'treated with politeness and courtesy at all times at this service' and that 'staff talk to me in a way I understand at this service' (Murphy et al., 2021, p. 98). However, parents were less satisfied with how educators viewed their input into their child's learning. For example, only 52% of parents agreed with the statement that their 'priorities and interests as a parent are considered when goals are set for their child' (Murphy et al., 2021, p.98). From the same study, 89% of the surveyed educators reported feeling very confident or extremely confident in communicating a child's success or achievements. When asked to report their level of confidence in sharing information about children's learning and progress, 81% of the educators reported feeling very confident or extremely confident. However, only 67% of the educators reported feeling confident to respond to concerns or complaints by parents and only 69% of educators encouraged parental involvement within their child's educational program.

The methodology used by Murphy et al. (2021) does not allow conclusions to be drawn about the viewpoints of male caregivers, parents with a low education level, parents with English as an additional language and those who do not have access to the internet (Murphy et al., 2021). Despite these limitations, useful information was garnered regarding how early childhood centres currently collaborate with families. Although, there was an overall sense of satisfaction among parents, they still felt their needs and expertise were not being drawn upon to support monitoring of their child's learning and development. Evidence from educators involved in the study also revealed that there is a need for more support and guidance in how ECEC staff can effectively respond to parents' concerns.

A study conducted by Almendingen et al. (2016) explores parents' experiences of collaboration with their ECEC service, educators' confidence to work with parents, and educators' training needs. The study found that 98% of educators (n=318) wanted further training in how to work with parents. Most educators reported that they had high confidence in sharing information about a child's progress; however, raising or responding to parent concerns, was more of challenge (Almendingen et al., 2016). Parents who participated in the study reported they felt a sense of belonging at their ECEC service, yet they still desired improvements in how educators shared information about their child's learning and development (Almendingen et al., 2016). Responding to these findings, the Parenting Research Centre developed and trialled an intervention called, Partnering with Parents. This intervention featured three components: 1) Making moments matter; 2) More than moments; and, 3) Working on concerns. Implementation of key concepts and strategies within these components was introduced over a 10-week schedule by a nominated practice coach within each service. A survey was implemented to explore the impact of the Partnering with Parents program following this intervention at 3 time points: before, immediately after and 3 months post the intervention (Petrovic et al., 2019). It is important to note that only parents and educators who raised or responded to a concern about a child in the previous 4 weeks participated in the survey (22.5% of parents; 86.6% of educators and 55.1% of educators respectively).

A qualitative, descriptive approach was used to analyse open-ended responses from this questionnaire and comments were each coded to specific themes. 'Respectful and responsive educators', 'Collaborative problem-solving' and 'Knowing how to communicate concerns' were some of the themes that emerged (Petrovic et al., 2019). Findings from the study suggest that parental characteristics such as the degree of reciprocity they display may affect how educators raise concerns (Petrovic et al., 2019). On the other hand, from the parents' perspectives, the degree of respect and collaboration educators displayed through listening and respecting parents' opinions was highly valued when raising concerns (Petrovic et al., 2019). Positive self-evaluation of educator's experiences also tended to occur when parents agreed with concerns raised and were inclined to be involved with proposed support strategies. Findings further suggest that educators who are actively supported to develop skills in promoting parent–educator relationships report greater confidence in their capacity to address child-related challenges (Petrovic et al., 2019).

When raising concerns with parents, several educators stressed the importance of knowing how to phrase concerns well and deliver information in a respectful and empathetic way (Petrovic et al., 2019). Inviting parents to share their perspective on how concerns can be addressed is a fundamental principle behind Australian ECEC practices (Department of Education and Training, 2016). Indeed, genuine partnership involves both parents and educators identifying and addressing children's needs, particularly when planning and implementing feasible and appropriate supports (Kuhn et al., 2017). Such approaches have been linked to greater parental trust in educators (Rautamies et al., 2019). These approaches allowed educators to gain insights into children's needs from the parent's perspectives, brainstorming support strategies suitable for the family and mutually agreeing with parents about which course of action to take.

Conclusion

This paper investigated possible approaches to partnerships in early childhood education. In children the early years are essential for neurological, social-emotional and educational growth (Tayler, 2012). It is, therefore, imperative that learning and development is continuously monitored to ensure the best outcomes (Mozolic-Staunton et al., 2017; Mozolic-Staunton et al., 2021). As demonstrated in this paper, effective partnerships between parents and educators can have a great impact on these outcomes.

Central to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is 'mutuality, reciprocity and shared decision-making' between families and educators. Prioritising these concepts allows educators and families to effectively discuss the learning and development of young children. The concept of mutual trust, as defined by social exchange theory, motivates parents and educators to work collectively (Halgunseth et al., 2009). Creating trusting relationships ought to be given high priority to support collaborative partnerships. Therefore, these concepts have informed the development of a resource for educators and parents to use to support collaborative partnerships in ECEC.

Findings from the study by Petrovic et al., (2019) have informed the development of this resource in three ways. First, the resource uses guided questions that aim to gain information about the child from the parents' perspectives. Second, it uses collaborative brainstorming prompts that help to develop suitable strategies for the family and service. Finally, the resource advises that stakeholders mutually agree on next steps to support the child's learning and development. These approaches, as supported by the literature, are all conducive to effective collaboration and improved outcomes for children (Petrovic et al., 2019).

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