Using the Knowledge Base about Family and Community Influences on Child Outcomes

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ABSTRACT: *Family and community partnerships with teachers can significantly influence children's learning and development. However, poorly designed programmes can be ineffective or even counterproductive. We investigated the knowledge base concerning these relationships and its application to a course on effective family/community partnerships. Using case methods we engaged a group of third year diploma students in studying a case report about difficulties and challenges of developing partnerships. Students were assessed before and after the case study on five aspects of their knowledge and case learning. We concluded that our case methods effectively engaged students in the complexities of developing partnerships. Data indicated that their thinking shifted from literal implementation of national guidelines to interpretative strategies that were responsive to the local context.*

INTRODUCTION

The potential of family and community working in partnership with teachers to enhance children's learning and development has been well established. Studies from the United States, Australia, Canada, and England showed that the home environment powerfully influences what children and youth learn within and outside school (Walberg, 1995). In Aotearoa/New Zealand there is also compelling evidence that the home environment significantly contributes to the education of young children (Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003; McNaughton & Glynn, 1998; Wylie, 2004). Walberg notes that strong and beneficial effects of learning occur when parents and educators engage in cooperative efforts although, he cautioned, the impact of these influences varies considerably.

In concluding a recent review, Biddulph, Biddulph and Biddulph (2003) explained, 'A key message emerging from the New Zealand and international research is that effective centre/school-home partnerships can strengthen supports for children's learning in both home and centre/school settings' (p.143). Their synthesis noted that 'what is remarkable about such partnerships is that when they work the magnitude of the positive impacts on children can be so substantial, compared to traditional institutionally-based educational interventions' (p.143). However, they cautioned, 'the quality and nature of such programmes is critical, and poorly designed or inappropriate programmes that are not responsive to families can be ineffective or even counterproductive' (p.143).

The cautions emphasised to us the importance of examining in depth the complexities of cross-culture community situations. In particular, it heightened

our concern for the Pasifika community in Aotearoa/New Zealand which is experiencing the largest disparities of participation in early education. Meade, Puhipuhi and Foster-Cohen (2003) observe that fewer Pasifika children attend ECE services than other New Zealand children and that they will comprise an increasing portion of birth-to-five-year-olds over the next 10 years. We see a strategic role for teacher education in changing this disparity through preparing prospective teachers to develop strong, effective centre/school with home and community partnerships.

The goals of our study were to identify effective strategies for preparing prospective and in-service teachers to develop strong, effective centre/school partnerships with home and community based on shared understanding, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. This we see as a priority for teacher education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. As Biddulph et al. (2003) concluded, 'The implications of the findings of this synthesis for teacher education (initial and in-service) need to be explored, particularly the findings relating to initiatives that staff can take to forge constructive partnerships with homes and communities' (p.182).

METHODOLOGY

Cultural and pedagogical considerations

We began our investigation with a general concern for the relationship between knowledge and practice. We see that teacher education must bridge the academic aspects of the knowledge base with the challenges and puzzles teachers face in the actual world of practice. This concern focused our effort on the role of teacher preparation, on our own teaching strategies, and on the situational complexities teachers faced as they work to develop family and community partnerships. McNaughton and Glynn (1998) suggest that for authentic community engagement to occur across cultures it is necessary to deepen teachers' knowledge and understanding through practical experiences with diverse communities. As Garvin (2003) states, 'All professional schools face the same difficult challenge: how to prepare students for the world of practice. Time in the classroom must somehow translate into real-world activity: how to diagnose, decide, and act' (p.56).

We were concerned with the 'situated' (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989), complex nature of centre/school relationships with family and community. The complexities arise from several sources. In particular, 'the term "family" has no fixed meaning, and that it can vary from culture to culture' (Hill & Yeung, 2000, as cited in Biddulph et al., 2003: 65). Neither does the term 'community' have a fixed meaning since its character and significance vary from culture to culture. Further complexities occur in Aotearoa/New Zealand where, for *Tangata Whenua*, 'the basic social unit, and the essence of being Māori, is considered to be the whānau. The whānau is usually kinship based and includes the extended family' (Biddulph et al., 2003: 65). This extended view of family carries associated social meanings that structure relationships. According to Hirini (1997) and Durie (l994) there are five capacities inherent in the whānau structure: capacities for caring, sharing, guardianship, empowerment, and planning. In the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) this concept is extended further through the concept of whanaungatanga

which refers to reciprocal and responsive relationships that are focussed around shared aspirations and goals.

In the Aotearoa/New Zealand context, these capacities are considered central to authentic partnerships. As the Ministry of Education (2004) notes, particularly for Māori and Pasifika communities, Aotearoa/New Zealand society

> … is becoming increasingly diverse as a result of population and social changes. The education system needs to become more responsive to diverse cultures and a wider range of students' needs and aspirations.… A broader view of achievement is needed to allow us to embrace aspects of culture, identity and well-being, as well as expanded ranges of skill and learning.
>
> (p.51)

For teachers, these cultural dimensions of family and community contexts are an increasing challenge but at the same time they offer the opportunity to broaden and develop their role in the teaching and learning relationship.

Case method inquiry in teacher education

Resnick (1987) has argued 'that technical, management, and professional education are all suffering from too much adherence to instructional forms borrowed from the traditional classroom' (p.17). She suggested the use of case-based teaching methods that could 'bridge the gap between classroom and practice' (p.17). We explored the issue further as participants in a study group of teacher education colleagues and through a study of the literature on case methods (e.g., Doyle, 1990; McAninch, 1993; Shulman, 1992; Sykes & Bird, 1992; Wasserman, 1994). The comprehensive analysis of the 'pedagogy of cases' by Shulman (1992) emphasised for our purposes that the narrative nature of cases was 'suited to the situatedness of the learning process' (p.24).

We began a small scale investigation of the use of case methods of teaching in which the objective was to teach a section of a third year Diploma of Teaching (ECE) course focussed on teacher, whānau and community relationships. This required the core instructional material to be an original case report (none were available or written for the Aotearoa/New Zealand contexts) based on actual centre/school sources. We planned the preparation of the case report and appropriate implementation of case method teaching.

Purpose and plan of the case teaching

The objective we addressed was to prepare students for developing effective teaching and learning partnerships with family/whānau and community members. The course coordinator/lecturer had recognised the complexities of developing partnerships across diverse early childhood cultures and communities and she wanted to provide a learning experience that would assist students in recognising their responsibilities as well as their limitations through reflexive processes of engagement. The plan was to use case methods teaching and to investigate its effectiveness for immersing students in the case.

We had three component objectives: to assess the viability of the case report, the teaching role requirements, and the student learning activities. Since

the course coordinator/lecturer was also the lead case writer, she had an intimate knowledge of the case report, the authentic source materials on which it was based, as well as the academic requirements and knowledge base.

The case report needed to be written in a way that would bridge from knowledge to practice; from our academic setting to the realities of early childhood centres and their communities. The location, events and characters in the case report are a fictionalised collage of authentic source materials. The collage does not reflect any particular series of episodes or relationships among the characters or situations portrayed. Preparation of the case report followed the general guidelines presented and discussed by Roberts (2001). In case methods research 'disguising' locations, events and persons is an accepted practice to protect anonymity and confidentiality. Due to the intimate nature of the Aotearoa/New Zealand situation we extended this practice by preparing the case report as an authentic collage composed of selected situations and 'stories' from a variety of sources, ideas, locations, events and characters over a long period of actual experiences in the world of practice.

The case report consists of three parts. Each part structures a segment of the teaching-learning sequence. Our academic responsibility was to engage the students in the course syllabus while situating the teaching-learning in the context of developing family/whānau and community partnerships. The national framework for partnership development is embedded in the principles of the early childhood education national curriculum framework, *Te Whāriki/Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996), and the implementation guidelines presented in *Quality in Action/Te Mahi Whai Hua* (Ministry of Education, 1998). *Quality in Action* recognises the diverse circumstances within which 'Desirable Objectives and Practices' (DOPs) are implemented by seeking to empower early childhood services 'to develop effective self-management services in keeping with their particular needs and circumstances' (p.6) and by 'encouraging management and educators to use their professional judgement about the best way to implement the DOPs' (p.6). The recommended implementation strategies are based on the DOPs – a requirement for all licensed early childhood services in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

As we authored the case report we kept in mind the *Best Evidence Synthesis* of Biddulph, et al. (2003) and related research. We sought to ensure students had opportunities to immerse themselves in case learning while drawing on their own experience in local situations and theories that they had learnt about during the previous two and a half years of the diploma programme, as well as their working knowledge of national guidelines for practice as teachers.

An assessment was planned of student understandings and attitudes as the basis for measuring the effectiveness of the case teaching and learning. Students responded to a questionnaire before and after the case teaching and learning. The questionnaire was based upon the course section content and included both Likert-type rating items and open-ended response items. One set of questions probed student prior knowledge of early childhood curriculum requirements and the role of the teacher in partnerships with families. The other set of questions asked for an assessment of their case learning experiences.

Participants

The students were non-degreed, experienced early childhood teachers studying for their diploma certification. The students were already experienced in early childhood settings, and had spent two and a half years of full-time study in early childhood education. As a result, we expected they already had a good knowledge of the national curriculum framework, an awareness of different cultures within the early childhood setting, and various teaching experiences of their own in the early education sector. There were nine participating students who, on average, had more than eight years prior experience in early childhood services. The students identified themselves in terms of three cultural groups: Māori, Samoan, and Pakeha.

Method and case material

There were four components of the instructional approach: the instructional sequence, the core instructional materials accompanied by readings, the teaching strategies, and the assessment questionnaire given to students before and after case teaching and learning.

Instructional Sequence

The implementation of the teaching plan occurred in three phases. In Week 1 the students were informed about case methods teaching and learning practices. They were oriented to *The Case of 'No One Came'* and the agenda for the next class session, and invited to join one of three study groups. Each student received a copy of Part I of the case that they were to study individually, along with accompanying readings, in preparation for the next class session. In Week 2 the three-hour class session was organized in a three-part sequence that proceeded with alternating small group and whole class discussions for each part of the case. The session ended with students planning their report assignments that were due one week later. In Week 3 students completed their report assignments that were scaffolded by an analytic framework. Learning from cases emphasises student experiences independent of the teacher and encourages extensive discussion both in small and large group formations. In particular, it assigns a major responsibility for students to read, analyse, comprehend and interpret the case text.

Material: The Case of 'No One Came'

The case report is structured in three parts. Part 1: 'No One Came: A Parent/Family Evening' presents the situation in which two kindergarten teachers arranged a parent evening but 'no one came'. This part ends with the teachers pondering what to do about improving their kindergarten relationships with family/whanāu/community. Part II: 'No One Came: The Unexpected Visitor' finds the teachers looking for clues in the national guidelines and related documentation (Ministry of Education, 1996; 1998). They are perplexed. They feel they have made genuine efforts according to the mandated *Desirable Objectives and Practices*. An unexpected visit by Sina, a previous colleague who was experienced in the community culture, occurs. They shared their quandary with Sina who offers to return and explore possible actions. Part III:

'No One Came: The Grandmother's Charm' is focused around Sina's return visit and discussion following the morning of observing in classrooms. Sina highlights the presence in the kindergarten of several family/whānau members and in particular a grandmother who spent time reading with small groups of children. Sina leads their discussion about her observations to explore possible sources of inspiration for renewed efforts for improving kindergarten-home/whānau relationships.

The three-part case sequence sought to elevate the tension reflected in the teachers' concerns about meeting mandated expectations. It fulfilled the purpose of challenging the emergent assumptions of students. As Wasserman (1994) asserts 'good cases dramatize these tensions, so the readers are stimulated to discuss them' (p.42). Infused into the case narrative and made available in the appendices were readings to 'wise practice' (Goodfellow, 2001: 1) and other kinds of source materials, including the Ministry of Education web site. In particular, the Pakeha Anglo-American tradition of individualism was highlighted by a paper by Gonzales-Mena (2003) as a basis for student discussion of similarities and differences with Pakeha, Māori and Pasifika whānau or family traditions.

This case approach demonstrates the indirect influence of research evidence on educational practice by mediating teachers' observations and judgements (Dewey, cited in McAninch, 1993: 28). The vehicles for such influence, Dewey held, were 'intellectual instrumentalities'. By design, a case report can be such an instrumentality. It became our teaching instrumentality for applying the best evidence knowledge base concerning the development of kindergarten partnerships with family/whānau and community.

Teaching Strategies

The teaching role in case methods calls for the instructor to be a facilitator of discussion (Naumes & Naumes, 1999). Discussion is generated in a cumulative progression beginning with students' individual study of the case report followed by small group discussions, and then whole case discussion facilitated by the instructors. Small group discussion is an opportunity for students to test their ideas – it is a rehearsal for participation in the whole class situation. Students selected their own groups, and the composition of these groups significantly influenced the way the case was approached and the ensuing discussions. Where all participants were of the same cultural group there was less challenge and consensus was quickly reached. Where a cross-cultural composition was evident in the groups, contributions raised more complexity and discussion that led to a greater depth of analysis. Inspired by Wasserman (1994), this trial was approached with much forethought about the facilitating role in relation to the purposes and structure of the case sequence. In particular, the approach reflected the importance of developing a pedagogy of listening within the teaching-learning relationship as Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) describe.

While the three small groups were in discussion the instructor circulated from one to another. The groups were then brought together at the end of each phase for the sharing and discussion of ideas generated. Use was made of Wasserman's paraphrasing techniques to urge students to think about what they were saying to avoid jumping to conclusions without looking at evidence and alternative actions. The instructor played a role of challenging preconceived

notions using the imagery of 'flipping a coin' to look at the other side; to look at the idea from a different perspective. With much self-discipline the instructor withheld comment and avoided intervening or providing solutions.

Student Final Report Assignment

Final student assignments were generated by each small group. The assignment framework was based on the technique of SWOT Analysis (Hill & Jones, 1998) so as to engage students in assessing their learning experiences in terms of four factors, 'Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats'. These factors were set out as a grid that related to theories, practices, and sources of evidence. The grid guided student group discussions in assignment preparation according to reflections from their study of the case events and characters. Students very quickly tuned into the framework and group work became intense. Each group report presented a solution to the teachers' dilemma and the rationale for the position supported by literature giving a base of evidence for justifying their proposed solutions. The discussions emerging as reports developed were stimulating, challenging, and provoked new ways of responding to obligations in contextually relevant ways.

Assessment Questionnaire: Rating and Open-Ended Items

Students were asked to rate five aspects of their case learning experiences in relation to teaching-learning issues. The five aspects were: support for their professional teaching role, relevance to their work, disposition towards case learning, and whether or not they would recommend to friends and acquaintances courses using case reports. Students were asked for their own open-ended comments about their learning experiences for each of the five aspects rated.

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES AND FINDINGS

The learning challenges and experiences were found to mesh well with the professional experience of the student group. Students viewed the case as authentic. Based on the student ratings, we found the case report to be functional, flexible and effective. For instance, after discussion of the case, one student commented in the assessment questionnaire:

> *This case was extremely interesting with an exciting scenario – which does happen in my own work in an early childhood environment. I have not been exposed to the barriers faced in this case – it makes me appreciate what partnerships you do share with families within your own workplace.*

Another commented that it 'allows for in-depth exploration of issues not possible with other teaching practices'. This was also evident throughout the classroom case discussions, especially during the small group discussions (described by the facilitator as a 'working buzz') that took place after a class section was finished and throughout the ensuing week before the next session.

Student pre- and post-case views

Prior to engagement with the case, students were assumed to have considerable knowledge about DOPs due to prior studies and experience. Their knowledge of DOPs as a mandatory requirement was reflected in ratings they assigned to four DOP statements. On average, their ratings ranged from 4.5 to 6.3 points on a 7-point scale from disagreement to agreement. After case learning activities were completed, students again rated the extent of their agreement with the DOP statements. The post-case average ratings declined and ranged from 4.1 to 5.7 points. The declines for the four items ranged from 1.3 to .3 points. We explain the declines as shifts in student conceptualizations of the national guidelines. The students shifted their understanding from a literal interpretation of discreet mandatory requirements to a more conceptual, interpretative understanding of applying theory and practice to actual kindergarten/whānau/community situations.

This shift in ratings was reflected also in the open comments by students. For instance, before the case teaching-learning sequence began, one student wrote, 'DOPs are a promise that we make to the government. The DOPs need to be present in everything a ECE worker does'. After the case study activities, the same student (responses were coded and respondent identity strictly protected) wrote, 'The DOPs are important but there are many different ways of implementing them, especially in a multicultural community'.

Student assessment of case learning

Students were asked to rate five aspects of their case learning experiences in relation to teaching-learning issues. The five aspects were: support for their professional teaching role, relevance to their work, disposition towards case learning, and whether or not they would recommend to friends and acquaintances courses using case reports. The average item ratings ranged from 6.0 (strong agreement) to 5.3 on a 7-point scale. The 'open comments' appear to support the generally high ratings for their case learning experience. For instance, one student commented in the questionnaire, 'This would give everyone a different perspective and open their eyes to the wider picture in what they are going to find as a teacher in the world'. The comments were sorted into four categories, each illustrated by a student comment.

1. Appreciation for the opportunity to draw on their own experience. For instance, 'Case method was exciting: it provided experienced people with an opportunity to be valued'.

2. Acknowledgement of opportunities to articulate in-depth analyses. For instance, 'Have loved the opportunity to express myself and how I think in relation to the case in a safe environment'.

3. Perception of the case as a representation of everyday situations. For instance, 'The case appeared real'.

4. Recognition of the diverse points of view arising in discussions. For instance, one student wrote, 'It allowed us to bounce ideas off each other in an informal way and develop a respect for each other's diversity. We learned from and with each other'.

DISCUSSION AND TEACHING REFLECTIONS

Our overall conclusion was that the classroom observations and the student assessment data indicated that case teaching and learning effectively engaged students in the challenges of developing kindergarten partnerships with families/whānau and communities.

Student discussions of the case indicated that they began 'thinking outside the square'. We speculate, as noted above, that their shift in thinking was from a literal interpretation of implementation guidelines to a more conceptual, interpretative understanding supported by an awareness of relevant literature in the context of actual kindergarten/whānau and community situations. Another aspect of shift in student thinking was expressed after case learning activities when the comments appeared less cliché-like, and were longer and more explanatory.

It would appear that the case facilitated more flexible approaches to mandatory requirements as students became immersed in the realities of professional practice. Shulman (1992) emphasises the importance of cognitive flexibility in complex situations when recognising that '… the instructional use of cases may help learners cope with the judgemental complexity of ill-structured domains of knowledge and performance' (p.25). He notes that 'the study of misconceptions has become a central focus of research on cognition …' (p.25) and cited findings by Spiro, Vispoel, Schmitz, Samarapungavan and Boerger (1987) who recommend '… a theory of case-based learning for transfer in ill-structured knowledge domains and suggested methods of case-based instruction to produce flexible knowledge representations' (p.196).

Teaching role and case discussion

During Part 1: 'No One Came: A Literacy Evening', students were inclined to 'blame' the two kindergarten teachers as they struggled with how to build relationships with their community. Students tended to react on first reading by saying: 'No … they're not doing it right! They need professional development'. Initially the students readily articulated the view that the Ministry of Education was driving the anxieties of the kindergarten teachers through ERO reviews and DOP expectations. Students empathised with the tension facing the teachers in the case between the mandatory requirements versus the realities of kindergarten centres and their communities. However, for them there was no question of the staff's accountability in terms of DOPs, and they expressed their early belief that all teachers really needed to learn more about the culture of the family/whānau and community.

Part II: 'No One Came: The Unexpected Visitor' proved to be quite pivotal for a shift in student thinking. The appearance of Sina seemed to mediate a shift from 'You're not doing it right' to the perception that the teachers had been trying very hard. 'Yes, the teachers have made genuine attempts'. The students began making lists about what the teachers had already done in an effort to address the situation. In short, they shifted from blaming to recognising the teachers' efforts even though they had not been effective. Students expressed the view that 'they (the kindergarten teachers) had a genuine desire to make a difference'. This was a very important turning point for the students. Now they

were able to articulate the dilemma of the teachers as grounded in literal implementation of mandated guidelines versus an interpretative view involving teacher judgement and problem-solving. They were also able to establish a rapport with the teacher and to move 'inside' the narrative. They began to explore the reasons why the teachers continued to struggle despite all their efforts.   The reading on individualism by Gonzales-Mena (2003) offered a possible explanation for the dilemma, and a point of identification for the students. One student exclaimed, 'Oh, I never thought about it like that before!'.

Part III: 'No One Came: The Grandmother's Charm' provided a 'platform' for consolidation of their shift in conceptualization. The mediating presence of Sina encouraged the shift in viewpoints and facilitated a forward look towards positive actions based on greater awareness of what was already happening in the teaching and learning environment and not previously noticed. The charm of the grandmother reading with children highlighted the possibilities in terms of participation and involvement. Not all students in a group shared the same opinions, but were able to challenge one another's views through dialogue and debate.

Student learning experiences

The students engaged and wrestled with the complex task of developing collaborative partnerships along with the national curriculum requirements. They began to realise that partnership development called for flexible approaches in response to the national curriculum framework as interpreted within the context of family/whānau and community realities. Further, the case supported students in recognising that the celebration of differences is not enough, as suggested by McNaughton and Glynn (1998). Underlying the formation of such partnerships is the tension for teachers between fulfilling implementation principles and taking actions in keeping with local needs and circumstances. Students did voice their struggle with this issue in a realistic way based upon their own experience for which they felt valued. One student's post-case questionnaire comments summed up the spirit of the class:

> *'Case Method' was exciting! It provided experienced people with an opportunity to be 'valued'. It allowed us to bounce ideas off each other in an informal way, and develop a respect for each other's diversity. We learned from and with each other. The case appeared real, instead of a fake scenario. Our conclusions had evidence from the case to back-up our thoughts. The small group size of our class allowed this plan to be something special. I have loved the opportunities to express myself, who I am, and how I think in relation to the case, in a safe environment. We should do more of this.*

For the Samoan students, in particular, the case was an opportunity for them to contribute cultural knowledge beyond the immediate experience of other members of the culture through the characters and issues highlighted in the case report. For instance, as a possible solution to the case, these women argued for employment of Samoan speaking staff as the only truly emancipating solution for the families in this community based on its composition. They argued that the present staffing was mono-cultural and based on criteria too

rigid to reflect the importance of cross-cultural knowledge and perspectives. This viewpoint provided lots of opportunities for discussion and challenged the cultural values and beliefs of other students. At the same time, the discussions allowed the Samoan students to see the dilemma facing Pakeha teachers in a cross-cultural community. The students realised that there were no easy answers to this case.

CONCLUSION

The intent of this case was to encourage students to engage with the complexities of cross-cultural partnership in an early childhood setting. Although originally authored for the diploma level course we now see the potential of the case for professional development with experienced teachers currently working in centres and communities with varied cultural contexts and traditions. A less complex case would also have relevance for pre-service teachers with little prior experience, provided that sufficient detail was provided for students to engage with the characters in the case. It has wider implications for teachers in other education sectors, who also strive to work effectively within diverse communities. In the case of 'No One Came', students had opportunities to grapple with such issues, in an authentic yet safe, learning context.

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