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The Untapped Opportunity of Families as Collaborators

Taking Inspiration from New Zealand

by Fran Simon and Geoff Nixon

If you were planning a trip to a distant and unfamiliar city, and a close friend had lived there for many years, would you reach out to learn more about the area? And, if your friend offered advice and helped you plan, would that improve your trip?

The answers here in most cases are, obviously, yes! In fact, your friend would

most likely love the opportunity to give you advice and practical help, if not act as your tour guide and collaborator. This article makes the case that this same opportunity exists for early educators and their relationships with the families in their programs. Are we taking full advantage of the insights and helping hand that most parents are all willing to provide?

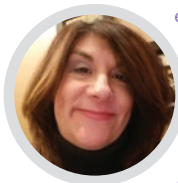
good job. But are these strategies collaboration? Are the insights and observations parents have about their children being integrated into the planning for each child and the group?

In our opinion, using technology for family engagement with such shallow expectations as a “thumbs up” or “like” is a waste of an opportunity. There is so much more that can be done to collaborate with families in person and online. We assert that quality learning experiences do not stop just because children go home, and parent involvement does not end when the children enter the classroom. Using technology and personal interactions with families, we can do more to create highly responsive individualized learning opportunities for each child and the group. By creating a planning cycle that draws in family observations and insights, early educators can do more to not only strengthen the bond between home and school, but also to build on what parents know about children to offer more meaningful learning opportunities at school. Conversely, when offered deeper insights about what children do, say, wonder, and experience at school, families can extend and deepen experiences at home. Certainly, we know this

Best practice in building relationships with parents includes parent-teacher conferences, program-wide meetings and events, daily reports, warm greetings and departures. We have also begun to embrace technology that supports family communication. In fact, the phrase “family engagement” has come to mean using many strategies that include personal interactions and online communication. Unfortunately, the term “online engagement” is often wildly misinterpreted and frequently implemented by offering collections of “Pinterest moments” and getting “Great pic!” comments back from parents as confirmation they are engaging. Daily reports, family conferences, family events, parent communication app messages and email newsletters are dutifully completed, and educators are happy they have done a



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type of individualization will improve learning outcomes.

This 24-hours per day, seven days a week model of quality learning opportunities requires authentic collaboration between early educators and families. This should be the goal. In the United States, some programs meet this goal, but unfortunately, it often seems that most cannot achieve this model. Because of high child to teacher ratios, large class sizes, underfunding, uneven teacher preparation, and the countless other demands teachers face, family engagement in the U.S. is often not a high priority. Many teachers tend to inform rather than engage, much less collaborate. Sadly, sometimes communicating with families is one more chore to check off the list, and even worse, there are programs in which family engagement is not intentionally considered.

We know many parents already happily contribute to their children's education to the best of their ability, in the ways they think are best and as invited by their children's program. We also know many would like to do more, but for one reason or another do not. In many cases, they feel intimidated, overwhelmed, unwelcome, or just have too many other demands on their plates. Yet, if we ascribe to developmentally appropriate practice, we believe families have a lot to contribute because they know their children best. Families are children's first and most influential teachers. It is our responsibility to make the most of their insights and relationships with their children. But sometimes, despite what we think are our best efforts, we fall short of creating strong partnerships through collaboration. Perhaps insights from other countries and cultures can help us improve our practices.

True parent-teacher collaboration is not just about parents sharing insights that enrich educators' understanding of each child, although that is a great starting point. Rather, it is about

creating a 360-degree picture of each child in different environments (center and home), where they have different relationships (family and center life) and then using the differing insights and perspectives from that child's circle of loving adults to improve the teaching, at home and in the center.

One country that has excelled at integrating parent-teacher collaboration into its early education process is New Zealand. This article will examine the approach to family connectedness in New Zealand, and specifically their family partnership model. We will then examine ways to take advantage of the untapped potential that parents represent.

Parent Engagement in New Zealand

The New Zealand Te Whariki curriculum requires early childhood programs to integrate parents' insights into classroom practices. Here is a summary of the New Zealand Ministry of Education statement on family collaboration:

"Teachers are responsible for establishing partnerships with parents and whānau (family) and creating a sense of belonging for all.

"Early childhood services that contribute to positive child and family outcomes are those:

- "where knowledge/funds of knowledge from home are valued.
- "where both families and teachers share responsibility for supporting children's learning, as we know that when parents and whānau are involved in children's education, this is beneficial for long-term achievement and success.

"Funds of knowledge are gained through whānau, community and cultural practices

and events, where children learn informally through observation and participation.

"Working together, teachers can identify culturally responsive teaching practices, drawing upon the knowledge and cultural capital of the parents and whānau they work with."

The flow of knowledge and understanding is powerful in both directions. There is so much about the child and the home environment that can be a valuable input for a teacher's planning for a child. And in the other direction, a teacher's insights into the value of play and developmentally appropriate strategies—for instance, using interests and/or strengths to build upon weaknesses—can help families see all kinds of new opportunities in the activities at home.

The New Zealand Early Education Environment

In New Zealand, family collaboration is an essential and highly prioritized part of every single day in the life of children in early education programs. A few things that make the New Zealand approach so distinctly different are:

- there is a mandated national curriculum, Te Whāriki, that requires educators to be aware and sensitive to the cultures of their children;
- most teachers have degrees and are comfortable discussing educational context with parents;
- teachers are trained in facilitating parent collaboration; and
- parents expect to be highly involved in their relationships with teachers, and teachers deeply believe this relationship helps them care for and teach children.

Teachers in New Zealand come into the field prepared to include parents' perceptions, intuition, and understanding in the planning cycle for every child and the group. They strive for

“authentic family collaboration,” the goal being to make parents true partners in the planning cycle of the center, and in creating high-quality learning experiences at home.

Programs in New Zealand are fundamentally different in terms of funding and teacher preparation, and even program philosophy. New Zealand spends more per child on their preschoolers than any other age or grade level. The idea of investing early started in the 1990s, when funding for free early education ramped up significantly, using the existing privately operated child care infrastructure and providing families with vouchers for their choice of early learning programs for 20 hours per week. This level of spending has implications for the staffing and resources available to a New Zealand center versus what is possible in the United States. It allows for teachers to have planning time away from other duties, lower teacher-child ratios, a higher degree of ongoing professional development, teacher preparation and pay. There are also fewer demands in terms of child assessment and administrative tasks.

Parent Perceptions

While New Zealand’s national system for early care and education is very different than United States’ fragmented state by state approach to child care, up close, you might not see the differences. Classrooms are similar, parents are just as loving and early educators are just as dedicated, focused on the same things in both countries.

However, because child care centers are required to follow the state mandated curriculum set by the Ministry of Education and are inspected by the same government department that inspects elementary and secondary schools, parents clearly understand that their child care center is an educational institution, that there is an educational curriculum, and that most of the people they

deal with at the center are trained professionals. Here in the U.S., families often rely on early childhood programs to care for their children while they are at work, but do not understand the importance of the development children experience in their early education programs or the teachers who provide these experiences like they do in New Zealand. Expectations for family engagement are also not as high here in the States.

In New Zealand, documentation and moments shared with families by teachers is expected by the Ministry of Education and by parents to have an educational context, a link to either a prior plan for a child, a plan for the class or to a curriculum goal or learning objective.

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Learning Stories

To meet this need, New Zealand has adopted the “learning story” as its primary documentation and assessment tool. Learning stories are observations written in a narrative, story-telling style (with a plot and a hero!) and are usually focused on a specific incident or episode. It may focus on a group activity, and be a learning story about an activity that the children did together, according to MyECE, a national directory of programs in New Zealand operated by a non-profit

organization. Learning stories are a bit different than our American concept of observations, because teachers add interpretations and alignments to what they refer to as learning dispositions. In New Zealand, teachers and parents specifically focus on positive characteristics, prioritized in their national curriculum, such as courage, curiosity, trust, playfulness, perseverance, confidence, responsibility and other approaches to learning.

Learning stories are personal, written in a style that evokes an emotional response from the writer and the reader. Many are written to the child or children who have been observed, in the second person, as in, “Lashanda, you were jumping in the puddle...” Learning stories are usually accompanied by photos, videos, or work samples that illustrate evidence of development. The Ministry of Education regularly reviews programs to ensure teachers are writing learning stories and sharing them with each other, and with families. Families also write learning stories about their children and provide them to teachers.

To manage learning stories and the process of sharing them with families and their responses, most centers use software that facilitates the sharing process. Because they are written from the heart, learning stories are engaging and richer than our concept of observations (which are quite sterile), social media posts or daily reports. The software helps create an informal, but very real and deep connection between parent and teacher. Every story shared can be the start of a two-way conversation about children as well as with children if parents and teachers use them that way. Teachers deeply value parents’ perceptions of the children, and parents value teachers’ insights. Both parents and teachers understand their symbiotic relationship.

Unlocking Parent Collaboration in the United States

Now, let's see how these ideas from the New Zealand system might be used in the United States to improve parent-teacher collaboration. The themes are:

- valuing parents as a resource, as the "child expert;"
- seeing early education as a 24-hour-a-day opportunity, with parents and teachers sharing responsibility; and
- educating parents on the value of early education.

As we have discussed, family engagement in the United States often includes the sharing of lots of smiling face images of children. While this is heart-warming and occurs everywhere in the world, images alone are also reflective of a "please-the-client" mindset. What parent does not love to see photos of their child smiling?

However, without any learning context, these images do not connect the dots from activity to their children's development and learning. Certainly, they please parents and give them peace of mind, but they do not provide insights about their children's development or educational practice. The New Zealand idea is to extract more from each family interaction to:

- seek out their advice and stimulate feedback that can create insights into a child that will help individualize planning; and
- bring them into the loop on the educational context of what goes in during the day, so they are better equipped to continue the education beyond the walls of the classroom.

The Importance of Learning Context: Deep Sharing

The secret sauce here is deep sharing—connecting everything to learning. It means making sure anything shared with families—images and/or observations—is linked to learning objectives, curriculum goals and/or planning goals, not just charming social media posts, but learning in progress, properly tagged and documented.

Learning context is about providing a variety of opportunities for families to connect with teachers to see illustrations of children's learning, provide feedback, or initiate observations of their own. It is about helping parents learn to associate play with developmental goals, which is often difficult.

The learning story is a great vehicle for this kind of observation. They are engaging, enjoyable to read and understandable for parents due to the narrative format, and yet rich in learning context making it a helpful formative assessment tool.

Deep sharing informs families, puts teachers and families on the same page about children's development, and thereby makes any exchange of ideas informed, meaningful, and helpful for both. In this model, both teachers and parents come together both in person and virtually to share documentation, work samples, photographs, reports, and videos that illustrate evidence of learning, learning goals, curriculum objectives or planning. This is the essence of authentic collaboration.

Furthermore, because deep sharing puts everything into an educational context, it continuously communicates the educational value of each program and the importance of the early years in shaping academic futures.

There are tangible and intangible benefits for educators and families that result from deep sharing. When early educators share evidence of learning, they provide important context about learning goals and objectives against a backdrop of developmentally appropriate practice. When families share anecdotes and observations about what children do at home, teachers learn about another dimension of children's abilities, interests, and development. These important interactions with early educators allow families opportunities to:

- give feedback in order to confirm or redirect teachers' perceptions and share insights from their experiences with the children in their natural habitat, their home life;
- provide cultural and familial context about their children; and
- extend learning experiences from school at home.

The net result is that family collaboration can enhance learning outcomes because:

- teachers can individualize their approach for each child; and
- concepts and learning skill growth can continue at home.

Both teachers and parents have insights that confirm or deny their preconceived notions about the child and benefit from insights they might never have had if it were not for this collaboration. Families see and appreciate the work teachers do to facilitate their children's learning, which not only boosts morale, but also builds authentic personal relationships, and sets the stage for lifelong parent engagement and involvement in education.

A Challenge to You

We know early educators in the U.S. work under very challenging conditions, some of which are less challenging or non-existent in New Zealand. The concepts of family collaboration and deep sharing may seem daunting, and in fact, may be out of reach for some programs. But we have stepping stones and tools that can help. This article offers new ideas you can implement and ways of using online early childhood communication software that are easier than you ever imagined.

The first step is a mindset shift to collaboration with parents as partners not just engagement with parents as customers. Second is exploring the idea of learning stories. Search “guide to writing learning stories” online to learn if that narrative format could play a role at your center.

Finally, we challenge you to ask yourself these questions: How can you and your program make use of the outstanding family model New Zealand offers? What steps can you take to implement elements of deep sharing in your program? Try something new today and see what happens with families tomorrow.

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