Providing culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand

Part 2: Developing Dialogue
Developing dialogue

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The first paper in this series Providing culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand - Part 1: Considering culture examined some current theory on ‘culture’, some of the concepts underlying successful inter-cultural communication, and their implications for early childhood education practitioners. The paper concluded with a call for mainstream early childhood practitioners to ensure that families from different cultures understand the premises upon which early childhood education programmes in New Zealand are based, by consciously ‘unpacking’ underlying theories and philosophies for families.

Developing good relationships with parents and families so that practitioners can begin to engage in meaningful dialogue with parents is the most successful way for teachers to begin to ‘unpack’ the early childhood education programme for parents. Dialogue enables practitioners to discover the beliefs and experiences that parents and children from different cultural backgrounds bring to their new experiences with early childhood programmes in New Zealand.

This paper examines ways in which teachers can engage and develop meaningful dialogue with parents from diverse cultures. It presents ideas for developing meaningful dialogue by drawing from my own teaching experiences, both as teacher and early childhood professional development facilitator, the writings and experiences of other early childhood educators working in diverse communities, and interviews with parents themselves.

Janet Gonzalez-Mena in her book Multicultural issues in child care states, ‘It’s good for children to receive culturally competent care that is sensitive and has a global, multiethnic view’ (2001, p17). An experienced childcare provider and an advocate for increased awareness of multicultural issues in early childhood education services, Gonzalez-Mena describes the essential requirements for providing culturally competent care as:

- respect – for children, parents and teachers;
- parents and teachers understanding that each may have different perspectives on early childhood education;
- parents, teachers and caregivers understanding that the values embedded in an early childhood education programme may differ from family values;
- parents and teachers finding ways to accommodate differences, and for teachers and parents to create ‘ongoing dialogues’ with each other.

Teachers and caregivers working in early childhood services are regularly talking to the parents of the children who attend their service. However, it has been my observation that often these conversations and discussions are snatched during a busy teaching session or as parents drop off or collect their children. Sustained conversations where shared points of view are established, and different points of view and experiences are clarified, can be something of luxury in a busy teaching schedule.

I became aware that developing dialogue with parents can be problematic for a variety of reasons. For example, some parents are very shy and are not confident enough to stay at the
centre. Conversely, sometimes parents believe that their children must learn to get along without them and fend for themselves in the new cultural environment. Sometimes talking to the children can be easier than talking to their parents as children often have a greater command of English than their parents. For parents using full day childcare services as opposed to sessional services, time constraints and parents’ commitment to paid employment may create even less opportunities for dialogue. However, there are two ways of engaging in dialogue that I believe can deepen and extend the relationship between practitioners and parents.

**Spontaneous dialogue**

For many years I was the head teacher of a kindergarten in a multi-ethnic, low socio-economic community in Wellington, New Zealand. It was a rich and vibrant community but one which constantly challenged the kindergarten staff. How was it possible to meet the needs of all these different children? How could we make every parent and child feel welcome and included in the programme? How could we adequately communicate the theory underpinning our teaching practice and the early childhood curriculum? And most importantly, how was it possible to create meaningful relationships with parents when so many of them spoke little or no English?

I believe that one of the greatest strengths of my kindergarten teaching team was genuine interest that each staff member had about the families who used the kindergarten. Consequently, staff regularly engaged in spontaneous dialogues with parents because they really were interested in finding out about aspects of different cultures, as well as a family’s previous experiences in their country of origin. These dialogues often provided insights into children’s strengths and interests, and sometimes had interesting spin-offs into the kindergarten programme, e.g. awareness of significant festivals that were then celebrated at the kindergarten. Staff understood that they were both teachers and learners and recognised that the parents who came to the kindergarten were an invaluable source of information about their children, their child-rearing and cultural practices.

Spontaneous dialogue often develops between teachers and parents/caregivers when parents/caregivers are given the opportunity to spend time at a centre with their children. One of the key responsibilities of teachers who wish to provide culturally competent care for children is to ensure that the centre is welcoming to all parents. Inviting parents to stay with their children, spending time developing a relationship with them by demonstrating an interest in their culture, and encouraging them to participate and contribute to the programme creates opportunities for spontaneous dialogue to occur between parents and teachers during a session. Although this sounds like an easy thing to do, it sometimes takes effort and persistence to develop trusting relationships that enable parents to feel comfortable staying at the centre.

**Key ingredients for successful spontaneous dialogue:**

- Provide an environment that welcomes all families - by talking to parents, showing an interest in their culture, finding resources that reflect the cultures of the children attending and including them in the programme.
- Actively encourage parents to stay and spend time with children in the centre whenever they can, and formally invite parents to stay for certain activities – workshops, breakfasts or lunches working bees (Ramsey, 1998, p103).
• Foster teacher curiosity about where children and their families have come from, and recognise how much can be learnt from engaging in meaningful dialogue with parents.
• Don’t be frightened about asking questions and inquiring about parents’ experiences in their country of origin, their culture, their religion and why they came to New Zealand. This interest can be very validating for parents.
• Find out what first language children and families use and ask parents to help staff develop ‘key’ vocabulary lists to use with the children. Ask parents to help with correct pronunciation.
• Find out information about the different cultural groups that use your centre – use the library and Internet, and then check out this information with parents at the centre. Use professional development opportunities to broaden understanding about ‘culture’ and intercultural communication.
• If there are non-English speaking parents using the centre, use other parents who speak the same language to help translate information and help staff develop rapport with these parents. Use translation services if necessary.
• Monitor feelings of comfort or discomfort when talking to parents. Observe which groups of parents are talked to most and work on spending time with those parents that are talked to least.
• Share the information gained from discussions with parents with the teaching team and record it when appropriate.

Recently I worked with kindergarten staff who were wanting to develop a better understanding of issues relating to working with diverse cultures so they could develop their relationships with some Somali families who had started using their kindergarten. These families were initially reluctant to participate in the programme in any way. The staff worked very hard to find ways to develop a rapport with the families by borrowing books from the library about the Muslim faith, finding out information on the Internet, buying children’s books that described important religious festivals celebrated by the Somali community, locating picture books written in Somali, asking parents for simple words in Somali to use with the children, and using photos of their children to convey aspects of learning processes to the families etc. This work enabled teachers to demonstrate to their Somali families that they really were interested in their culture and slowly, as the year progressed, the parents became more involved with the programme, began helping the staff, and became more open to developing dialogues.

Creating opportunities for formal interviews

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to record interviews with some of the parents who had children at my kindergarten. I wanted to learn about the experiences these parents had of the New Zealand kindergarten system and compare them with their experiences of early childhood services in their home countries and I was interested in getting the parents to reflect on their process of adapting to the early childhood system in New Zealand. I was amazed at how much I learnt from these very planned and quite formal interviews.

As a result of these interviews I realised that some cultures have very formal relationships with teachers and that relationships with parents in mainstream early childhood education services in New Zealand can seem very informal to them. A formal arrangement is a preferred option for some parents. For example, during an interview with a father who had immigrated to New Zealand with his family from Jordan, I discovered he and his wife had several areas of concern when he first started his children at the kindergarten that he had not been able to discuss with me
at the time. The system of induction that was practiced at the kindergarten had failed to provide an opportunity for in-depth discussions about his expectations and the kindergarten practice. He expressed this opinion:

“I think it [the programme] should be explored with the family… it’s a good idea to interview the family… not just to enrol like I did… it is very important to sit with the family and say well we do this and this… so they know what to expect [from the programme] and for you to know what we expect… how our child should be taught…”

When I reflect upon the induction system in place at our kindergarten at that time, I realise the process was designed to tell parents’ about what happened in the kindergarten with the (unconscious) expectation that they would accept it unquestioningly, rather than consciously engaging parents in a two-way discussion about the early childhood programme.

Gonzalez-Mena suggests that intake questionnaires (2001, p28) that ask for cultural information can create important opportunities for information exchange between teachers and parents. This type of questionnaire could provide a useful basis for structuring the formal interview process. For parents with little or no English this is an excellent opportunity for them to talk to teachers with the help of an English-speaking support person.

Key ingredients for successful formal interviews:

- Be well prepared before meeting with parents – develop a set of relevant questions or intake questionnaire.
- Find out about parents’ previous experiences of early childhood services in their country of origin.
- Ensure parents have an English-speaking support person with them if they don’t speak English fluently. Often parents have their own contacts within the community, e.g. they may have an English-speaking sponsor or friends and family members that speak English. However, it is always useful for teachers to establish contact with people they know who could assist non-English speaking parents, e.g. ex-parents, ESOL tutors etc.
- Wherever possible ensure key information is available to parents in their own language so they can take this away with them to share with other family members. You may need to negotiate with the employing authority or centre owner to get key information translated.
- Arrange for formal interviews to occur without the distractions of children engaged in play, e.g. in non-contact time or in a quiet room within the centre where parents can feel at ease.
- Share the information you gain from discussions with parents with your teaching team, and record it when appropriate.

Formal interviews will give both teachers and parents a starting point for getting to know each other better, and for teachers to get to know more about the child’s interests and his/her family. However, this is only the beginning and may not elicit all the information practitioners feel they need. The information gained at this interview, however, will provide an excellent fund of knowledge that teachers can draw upon for on-going dialogues with parents and caregivers.

One of the most interesting topics for discussion with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds is their experience of early childhood education in their countries of origin. Very often their
children have had experience of early childhood services that are markedly different from the services provided in New Zealand. The next paper in this series *Creating culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand - Part 3: Parents’ experiences of different pedagogies* describes three parents’ experiences of early childhood programmes in their countries of origin.

**Bibliography:**


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