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The Family Participation in Child Care Study: Educator views

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Introduction

The capacity of educators to work in partnership with families is considered to be a hallmark of quality practice in education and care. The rationale is that “children thrive when families and educators work together in partnership to support young children’s learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9). There is a growing body of evidence that shows the establishment of true and meaningful partnerships between educators and families offers many shared long-term benefits, including enhanced early learning and wellbeing, increased parent and educator capacity to promote learning and wellbeing, increased job satisfaction for educators, and greater appreciation of the contribution of early childhood education and care (ECEC)¹ to individual and national educational, social and economic outcomes (Child Australia, 2011; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern & Douchane, 2007; Knopf & Swick, 2009). These benefits are attributed to the formation of “genuine partnerships” (DEEWR, 2009, p.12), which are characterised by the development of trusting respectful relationships, two-way information sharing (i.e. educators share information and seek feedback from families) and opportunities for families to participate in their child’s learning and service.

To support genuine partnerships, the Brisbane South Professional Support Network (PSN) is leading a collaborative project, with the Workforce Council and QUT, known as the *Family Participation in ECEC project*. The overarching aim of the project is to investigate different perspectives of family partnership in ECEC, with a focus on information sharing, information seeking and family participation, to build educator capacity to establish and maintain genuine partnerships with families. We expected that within a diverse group of families, educators and services, there would be both similarities and differences in views and experiences of partnership. In addition, it has been suggested that the idea of partnership may be understood quite differently between parents and educators (Hujala et al., 2009). Maintaining a practical focus, and inking to the *National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (Quality Area 6), the study findings offer insight into the different ways that diverse families and educators may view and experience partnership, and, as such, provide a sound basis for critical reflection, professional learning and improved practice.

1. This report uses the term ‘early childhood education and care (ECEC)’ to refer collectively to early childhood services prior to school (e.g. child care centres, family day care, kindergartens), outside school hours care services and in home care services.

The Family Participation in ECEC project

The *Family Participation in ECEC project* commenced in July 2011, and comprised two phases. Phase 1 sought to identify parents' views and experiences of information sharing, seeking information and parent participation in ECEC. Eighteen ECEC services (spanning the full range of ECEC services and diverse socio-cultural communities) and 196 families from these services participated in this phase. Fourteen of these services continued through to Phase 2, with 50 educators sharing their views and experiences of partnership in ECEC. In the first edition of *In the Loop 2012*, we shared findings from the first phase of the project. In this article, we share findings from the second phase, and look at some of the identified similarities and differences between parents' and educators' perspectives.

Key findings from Phase 1: Parents' views on partnership

The context for partnership

- Parents' top three reasons for using an ECEC service were: 'to enable parents to work' (92%); 'to promote early learning' (53.6%); and 'to connect with other children and families' (45.4%). Over one-third of families reported using two or more ECEC services to meet family needs; many also identified school as another service they were using and trying to support.

Satisfaction with current practice

- Parents were generally satisfied with their service's approaches to information sharing, seeking information and family participation (average rating was 3.8 out of 5). The area of practice that received the highest rating was 'sharing information about what's happening in the service' (4.1); the area that received the lowest rating was 'seeking parent feedback on the educational program' (3.6).

Information sharing

- Parents indicated a preference for informal information sharing, in particular, chatting with educators at the beginning and end of the day, followed by emailed notes and newsletters. Not surprisingly, they most liked to receive information about their child's learning and day. While generally satisfied, many parents wanted more information about their child's learning progress and how they could support learning at home.

Family participation

- When asked if they wanted to participate, most parents, but not all, said that they did. However, responses also indicated that many parents had a restricted view of parent participation, perceiving that participation meant physical presence at the service.
- Most parents (78.8%) perceived that their service encouraged participation and provided a range of ways for them to participate; one-fifth perceived limited or tightly defined opportunity to participate (participation constructed as 'fund-raising', 'attending meetings' and/or 'attending special events'). A few parents said they didn't know what their options were and/or felt their participation wasn't really needed or valued by their service.
- Lack of time was perceived to be the greatest barrier to information sharing and parent participation (busy parents and busy educators).

Expectations of partnership

- Parents hoped that working in partnership with educators would deliver a range of benefits including: the best outcomes for their child (e.g. happy children, early learning and development); regular open and honest communication; opportunities to participate in their child's education and service; a service that was responsive to both child and family needs; and parents having trust and confidence in their child's service.

Phase 2: Educators' views on partnership

In July 2012, Phase 2 of the study was launched to investigate educators' views and experiences of working with parents in ECEC. Fifty educators spanning the full range of ECEC services, a range of positions (e.g. director/coordinator, educational leader, educator, in home carer), different levels of experience and diverse socio-cultural contexts responded to an online survey that mirrored the parent survey. Concentrating on the same elements of practice (i.e. information sharing, seeking information and family participation), here is a snapshot of some key findings.

To begin, educators were asked to identify why families used their service. The intent of this question was to provide insight into the context for partnership and how educators viewed their work. Once again, as may be expected, the most common response was 'to enable parents to work' (94%); followed by 'to connect with other children and families' (44%) and 'to enable parents to study' (40%).

To provide an indication of the effectiveness of current strategies, educators were asked to rate their service on information sharing, seeking information and supporting participation. Educators generally perceived their service was performing well in each of these areas (average rating 4.1 out of 5). Top marks were given for 'sharing information about the service' (4.3%); the lowest rating for 'seeking feedback from parents on the learning program' (3.8%).

Indicating a preference for informal approaches to information sharing, educators said they most often shared information with parents about their child's day and learning, and preferred to do this by chatting with parents at the beginning and end of the day. A number of reasons were offered in support of this approach. It was seen to be more convenient for parents, enabled timely information sharing, helped educators to get to know children and families and, most importantly, supported relationship building. Again, time was identified as the greatest barrier to information sharing, the main difference being that educators tended to focus on 'busy and time poor parents'. Drawing on their professional experience, educators offered ideas to strengthen information sharing. Shared themes included: building genuine relationships; being available to talk with parents (particularly at drop off and pick up); engaging in positive and *meaningful* conversations (not just when difficulties arise); being prepared to share information (thinking about what you want to say and how best to say it); ensuring regular and ongoing communication; and knowing your families and sharing information in a variety of ways to suit different needs (asking parents what is the best communication method for them).

While educators tended to rate their service well on providing opportunity for parents to participate (4 out of 5), perceptions of family participation varied considerably, with an average rating of satisfactory (3.33 out of 5), with just under 40% reporting 'limited parent participation' at their service. The implication here is that services were providing opportunities for parents to participate, however, parents were not taking them up. Upon closer examination, this may be attributed to narrow definition of what counts as participation, with some educators understanding participation as parents being physically present at the service. Drawing on their professional experience, educators offered ideas to strengthen family participation. Shared themes included: offering choices as to how and when parents participate; building relationships and talking with parents; promoting opportunities for parents to participate; valuing and recognising parent efforts; and helping parents to see and understand the benefits of their participation for their child.

Finally, educators were asked what they most wanted out of a partnership with parents. While there were differences in hopes and expectations, there were some shared themes. Mostly, educators hoped that working with parents would deliver a range of benefits for children and families including: the best outcomes for children and families (happy children, families and educators); enhanced communication and understanding; and shared decision-making. In addition, educators sought some professional and personal benefits, in particular, to feel valued by families and to be supported in their work.

Reflecting on similarities and differences in views

Identifying different ways of viewing and experiencing partnership, the project provides a platform to support critical reflection, professional learning and improved practice. Over recent years, considerable emphasis has been placed on educator's capacity for critical reflection. Promoted in current learning frameworks (DEEWR, 2009; 2010) and professional standards (AITSL, 2011), critical reflection is also recognised to be a significant element of quality practice (MacNaughton, 2003; Van Keulen, 2010). The *Framework for School Age Care* defines critical reflection as "examining and analysing events, experiences and practices from a range of perspectives to inform future planning and decision-making" (DEEWR, 2010, p. 41). Building on more traditional notions of reflective practice, the distinguishing factor is that *critical* reflection requires engagement with multiple understandings of practice (Noble, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2004). Looking at the same area of practice from a range of viewpoints provides greater insight into what is working well and for whom, and where and how we can improve practice for others. In this final section, we highlight some broad similarities and differences in the collective views of parents and educators in this study. As you read through this section, we invite you to think about how these findings resonate with

your experience of partnership at your service, why there might be differences in views, and how thinking about similarities and differences in views can be used to support improved practice.

Some similarities in views

- While parents and educators tended to rate their services well on information sharing and participation, both identified room for improvement in information seeking, in particular 'seeking parent feedback on the learning program and service'. The NQF requires services to provide opportunity for families to contribute to service decisions, including decision-making about their child's learning.
- There was a high level of consistency between the type of information that parents most liked to receive and the information that educators said they most often shared (i.e. about the child's day and learning).
- Parents and educators both preferred personal and informal approaches to information sharing, in particular, chatting at the beginning and end of the day and linked these conversations to relationship building.
- Parents and educators both identified time as the greatest barrier to information sharing and participation. Interestingly, parents saw this as a shared issue whereas educators tended to focus on 'busy and time poor parents'.

Some differences in views

- Both parents and educators identified work as the main reason for families using ECEC, but a greater proportion of parents than educators linked ECEC to early learning. 'Promoting early learning' was the second most frequent response from parents (53.6%) and the fourth most frequent response from educators (36%).
- While generally not significant, educators consistently rated their service better than parents at information sharing, seeking information and providing opportunities for parents to participate.
- Educators tended to rate themselves well on providing opportunities for parents to participate but then rated parent participation at their service as satisfactory and/or limited. The suggestion here is that educators were providing opportunities but parents were not taking these up. This may be attributed to some narrow and restricted views of what counts as participation, evident in some educator and parent responses.
- There were many similarities between what educators and parents wanted out of a partnership (see Table 1). One key difference is that while parents focussed on outcomes for their child and family, educators were also seeking some personal benefits (e.g. to feel valued; to be supported in their work). Partnerships are generally based on mutual benefit.

Conclusion

The *National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* and related learning frameworks encourage critical and collaborative reflection to inform practice change and continuous quality improvement in ECEC. *The Family Participation in ECEC Study* offers insight into the different ways that a diverse group of parents and educators viewed information sharing and seeking, parent participation and partnership in ECEC. The study findings may be used by services in a number of different ways, for example:

- to strengthen educator’s awareness and empathy for different parent’s views and expectations of family participation in ECEC;
- as a tool to support critical and collaborative reflection on current practice (i.e. to identify and celebrate strategies that are working well alongside areas for further attention);
- as a resource that offers a range of practical strategies to support and strengthen family participation in ECEC.

Table 1: Comparison of educators’ and parents’ goals for working in partnership

Educators’ perspectives	Parents’ perspectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To feel valued 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be supported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust and confidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The best outcomes for children and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to participate in their child’s service • Promoting learning and development and proactively sharing information about their child’s learning • Best outcomes for children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happy children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happy children/happy environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The best service for children and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsive to both child and family needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service provides regular information about their child • Open and honest communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared responsibility

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