

Chapter 2 - “Who are we?”: Individual identity

“I have gained so much from the art experiences we all took part in. By this I mean the closeness and sharing of teacher learning and getting to know our passions and interests. This has continued throughout as we respect our differences and talents in our professional working day.” (Christina Taylor, teacher researcher)

Introduction

This chapter presents findings that illustrate the strengthening of individual identity for members of our community: teachers, parents/whanau and children. In the first section of this chapter, we describe how understandings about parent identity emerged from insights gained through a parent survey. Parental perspectives strongly influenced the teacher researchers’ view of their parent community and as a result parents became valued and acknowledged as individuals rather than seen as a group of people with common characteristics. The second section of this chapter tells how teachers brought the notion of individual identity (child, parent and teacher) into current learning and teaching documentation practices and, in so doing, strengthened their understandings of socio-cultural learning theory. The concluding section describes the emergence of an identity of individuals in this learning community as co-learners; adults and children sharing the roles of teacher and learner. This understanding emerged as teachers firstly questioned difference in pedagogical approaches in visual art. Through developing teacher confidence and capability in working in visual art with children, teachers gained a positive view of themselves as learners in this domain and community participation in visual art strengthened. One teacher’s story is shared as an example of the process teachers experienced in coming to know oneself as a learner and teacher. The outcome of this area of exploration is presented as a framework that describes the image of a co-learner in visual art. The identity of the co-learner is described as:

An explorer,

An achiever,

A participator, facilitator, contributor,

A dreamer and player, and

A communicator.

Individual identity

The placement of this chapter early in this research report reflects how significant acknowledgement of individual identity has been to this research journey, as evidenced in the title of the report. The I in “communitY” can refer to I for individual as well as I for identity.

This research is based on particular assumptions about the way identity is created and understood: that is, that *identity* relates to who we are, defined through our lived experiences and interactions - how we live from day to day. Developing an understanding of identity of individuals, parents, children and teachers, was a critical influence on teacher practice and in turn on participation in the community.

Influence 2.1: Wenger (1998) - Communities of practice

Influences point to literature that has helped us shape our ideas.

Wenger (1998) suggests that identity is the way we define who we are through a layering of events of participation and reification. Identity emerges in the ways our experience and its social interpretation inform each other; it is an ever evolving concept. Identity differs from self image, as

‘who we are lies in the way we live day to day, not just in what we think or say about ourselves, although that is of course part (but only part) of the way we live’ (p. 151).

To view identity as a label or category can limit understanding of what identity means in practice. Identity in the context of our research has been constructed through experience and interpretation as we have negotiated meaning through our research data.

Identity is something we internalise; our actions and behaviours are manifestations of how we view ourselves and how we view others. Teachers at New Beginnings Preschool came to understand how the perception they hold of themselves and the people in the community (or the way they define others) influences their practice and in turn influences how people participate in their community. This journey to understanding will be illustrated through the use of the three diagrams previously presented in chapter 1 of this report. The diagrams illustrate a shift firstly from identity as a group member to identity as an individual within a group, and finally individual identity as a co-learner, a capable and competent member of the community.

Participating in research that focused on teacher practice contributed to teachers strengthening their individual personal and professional identity and also their view of capable, competent others: colleagues, parents/whanau and children. Teachers developed an identity of themselves as teachers and learners that generated understanding of what it means to be a *co-learner*. The term *co-learner* describes a relationship in which teaching and learning is a venture shared among participants, where responsibility and expertise are fluidly shared. That is, no one participant retains power in the relationship.

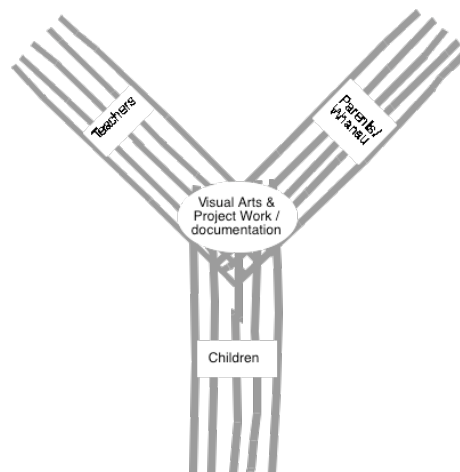
Influence 2.2: Jordon (2004) - Co-construction

Our definition of a *co-learner* has been influenced by Jordan's (2004) description of the co-construction metaphor, one in which she describes co-construction as a process of constructing with others. Co-construction places emphasis on teachers and children together studying meanings. *Co-learner* is the name we have given to any partner in the co-construction process.

The identity of parents as participants

As teacher researchers began this research project they held very strong views of their community as a social setting in which joint participation by parents/whanau, children and teachers in children's learning could occur. At this time participants in the community were described by teachers as groups of parents, teachers and children as the first exhibit (2.1) depicts.

Exhibit 2.1: Three groups of participants



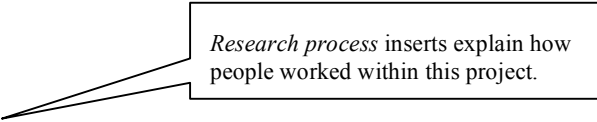
Teachers viewed themselves at that time as a collaborative group responsible for planning and preparing the learning environment, for ensuring parents were kept informed of children's everyday experiences and for supporting children's participation and learning. The groups of children and parents/whanau were viewed by teachers according to assumptions about their position in the community. For example, children were the learners, teachers the teachers, and parents could choose to be bystanders, participants or contributors.

Building parental participation in children's learning was an initial goal for the teacher researcher team. This aspect of the research is described in more detail in chapter 3. In this chapter we highlight one of the outcomes of this research cycle, recognition by teachers of all parents as interested and willing participants in their children's learning. Teachers came to view parents as individuals, each interested and willing to participate in ways that they chose.

Changing views on parental participation

Many parents were already viewed as active participants in centre life. Teachers had identified participating parents as those who joined in centre events, contributed resources and expertise, spent time in discussions with teachers, read documentation displays or their child's profile books or took them home, as well as those who were members of the management committee. What the teacher researcher team discovered is that participation is not always visible in the centre. Previous assumptions held about those parents not visible in the centre as being not interested were challenged as teachers discovered how participation looks different for individuals at different times.

Listening to the perspectives parents offered in a parent survey contributed to teacher learning in this area.



Research process inserts explain how people worked within this project.

Research process 2.1: Surveying parent opinion

A parent survey was distributed to a total of seventy-six families who had children attending the centre at that time. The purpose of the survey was to gather information from parents about the value of the documentation in children's profile books and to elicit parent perspectives about building relationships and participation in the centre.

Thirty-seven surveys (almost 50%) were completed and returned. While the response rate was lower than expected, it was significant in that a large number of the responses came from parents who were not previously represented in research data. Previous activity involved recording an overview of the families who were actively participating in their children's learning at the centre. Prior to the parent survey 57% of the families had been identified as active participants. Of the parent survey responses, thirteen (35% of the total) were from parents who were not represented in our data. Another twelve (32.5%) were from parents who had limited previous involvement. The remaining 32.5% represent parents who are actively involved.

The survey was collated and distributed to the teacher researcher team to individually reflect on prior to participating in a team meeting where discussion and analysis occurred.

The responses to three questions in particular provided the teacher researcher team insight into how parents view themselves in their relationship with the centre. The first question asked '*How do you feel about contributing information from home to your child's profile book?*' This had been a recent addition to profile book practices. Teachers were looking for feedback on whether it was a practice that was equally valued by parents and teachers.

Overall, parents enthusiastically supported the practice. Parents reinforced teacher beliefs that contextual information about children is essential to supporting children's learning. E.g. "*a great way to keep the information flowing and helps both parties to make important links and decisions*"; "*it's great because every day (child) learns new things and if we all know it's easier to keep it going*"; "*I think it's good to bring in things from home, it shows interest coming from the parents in what the kids are doing*"; "*if I can help my child in any way, I'm in!*"

These responses validated parents as interested participants in their child's learning. Parents clearly indicated that not only are they interested but they also assume responsibility for supporting their children's learning at the centre. Teachers could let go of any reservation held about their expectations of parents to contribute to children's teaching and learning. While parental contribution was not always evident within the centre, it was occurring at home.

Parents are partners

The identity of parents as willing partners in children's learning was made visible to teachers through the responses to the second question *'What are your views about the parent role and the teacher's role in our centre?'* This question attracted the largest amount of parental response. Three key messages summed up the views of parents.

1. Teachers and parents share a dual role in children's education. Many commented on how they believe parents and children need to work together for the child's benefit. E.g. *"I feel it is important to try to integrate roles and relationships between the two if possible. It's good for the child to experience a bit of home at preschool and vice versa"; "the teacher's role is to encourage at preschool and the parent's role is to continue to encourage at home. Both (need to) keep the communication open between the two and discover how best for the child to learn."* It was clearly evident that parents value the connectedness of centre and home as being important in supporting children's learning.
2. The parent's role is to support teachers. Parents spoke of how they help teachers by sharing information and becoming involved in centre activity when they choose to. There was also some acknowledgement of how they support teachers by supporting their child at home, *"I believe that children need their parents to support and encourage their work at the centre – if mum/dad are excited and interested it enables the kids to be free with their imagination."*
3. The teacher's role is to support parents. Parents discussed how they learn from teachers and appreciate the expertise they bring to the relationship. As one parent explained, *"the teacher's role is to not only help parents teach the children but to teach the parents as well."*

Parents in this community presented the view of an interdependent relationship with teachers. They see the two sets of adults as complementary. Parents offered a view of themselves as teachers as well as learners in their relationship with the centre. The traditional view of teachers in the centre as experts did not predominate; the comments were suggestive of parents viewing themselves as co-learning partners.

Parents are active participants

The responses from the third question ‘*How do you use the profile book when you take it home?*’ significantly contributed to teacher researcher’s understandings of parent participation. The following summarizes the ways children’s profiles books were used by parents:

1. Parents use the information to inform them of their child’s learning and development and the progress they are making. E.g. “*I read it so I know what new things my boy’s learnt*”; “*look back on how much (child) has achieved over the past year*”; “*By reading it I am able to catch up on (child’s) progress – this is especially important to me as I am not there very often.*”
2. The profile books are used to celebrate the child with family, whanau, friends and others. E.g. “*We look through it together, (child) and I. I share it with my family and where appropriate, my friends. I like to show off my baby*”; “*I show it to my son’s family (Grandma, dad etc.)*”; “*I show it to friends and family.*”
3. They provide the basis of discussion between families and their child. The types of discussions described indicated that children revisit and consolidate their learning experiences and participate in self-assessment with their parent/family. E.g. “*we read it as a family then talk about what the photos are about and her drawings and pictures. We try to answer her questions and explain what the letters are about*”; “*show dad and go through them with the children and ask them what they think is happening in the picture.*”
4. Parents use the information to keep them current with their child’s project interests at the centre so they can support their child’s participation. E.g. “*...look at the new project they are currently doing and encourage them to talk about it.*”
5. Parents use the profile book as a link between centre and home to provide continuity in experiences. E.g. “*(I) try to think of ways to further their learning skills – keep it going at home as well as preschool*”; “*I might write about things the children like to do at home, holiday pages, notes on general development or experiences that relate to projects.*”

Parent participation took on new meaning as teachers reflected on these parents’ comments. Participation was occurring in ways that teachers had previously been unaware of. Children’s profile books acted as a vehicle for home/centre communication as well as a tool that supported participation of the wider community, children, family/whanau and friends.

It was important to the teacher researcher team that the opinions offered in the survey included those from many parents who were previously considered non-participants (or not interested). The

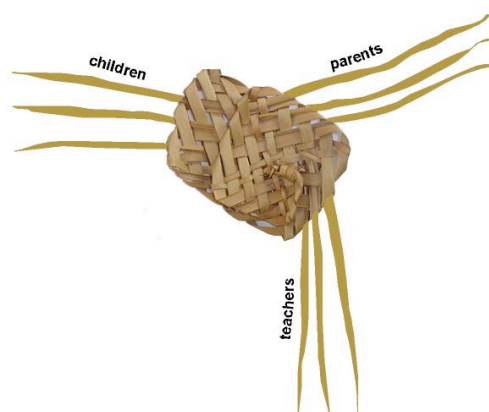
understandings gained through these responses contributed to teachers revising their image of the parents to one of equitable partners in the community.

A shift in the image of parents/whanau

Teachers acknowledged that their view of parent participants in the community had shifted from one that assumed some were interested while others weren't, to an understanding that all parents were willing and interested partners. Through the survey parents contributed a view of themselves as willing and interested participants in the learning community. Teachers discovered that parental participation occurs beyond the walls of the centre, and that participation looks different for different people at different times. Parents described how they supported their child's learning and they provided an image of themselves as co-learning partners. This challenged teachers' prior assumptions that some parents were disinterested or not willing to be involved. Teacher practice responded to the shift in image of parents by further developing communication practices to invite participation in children's learning and provide individual choice in pathways to participate. This aspect of the research is described fully in Chapter 3 – Doing the hard work, building relationships.

This early research process involved teachers challenging previously held assumptions and definitions of the differing groups of participants. Exhibit 2.2 illustrates the shifting image of individuals in the community. The boundaries around each group were broken down as individuals became valued for who they are, empowered to contribute and participate through their own choice and in their own way.

Exhibit 2.2: The first evolution – viewing individuals



Sharpening the focus on individuals within the group context

From the beginning of this research project the teacher researcher team articulated a strong belief in children as competent and capable learners. This view had shaped teacher practice in implementing a project approach to the curriculum. Teachers had developed documentation practices to capture the continuity in children's learning that occurs through engagement in project work. Alongside this documentation teachers also collected learning stories of children involved in other aspects of the centre programme. A convergence in the action research cycles occurred at this point as investigations into parental participation connected with investigations into project work. Documentation of children's learning was the common factor. On reflection, teachers identified that they were documenting children's learning in two distinctly different ways, one as an individual child in the regular programme and the other as a group participant in project work. Participation in project work was documented as a group experience, describing and discussing learning as if all participants were gaining similar outcomes, whereas participation in other aspects of the programme was documented as an individual experience with individual learning highlighted. In Chapter 3, the impact of this discovery and teacher learning about documenting individual children's learning is further described. In this chapter we focus attention on how teachers developed ways to sharpen their focus on individual learning within a group-learning context, and in so doing developed an understanding of 'learning as a transformation of participation' (Rogoff, 2003).

Individuals within social learning theory

Placing a focus on individual children within a social learning context posed a dilemma for teachers. Prior to 2002, centre documentation practice had been heavily influenced by developmental views of learning, where individuals were observed and assessed in isolation from the social context of the centre. Concern raised by the team was that there could be a tendency to revert to the previous 'developmental' flavour of writing if they began to write solely about individuals involved in group projects. The team needed an alternative approach. Prior discussions about the use of Barbara Rogoff's (2003) three analytical lenses provided a possible tool for teachers to use that would enable them to focus on individuals while retaining the complete 'picture' of the teaching and learning experience. The team decided to revisit this idea.

Influence 2.3: Rogoff (2003) Three foci of analysis

Rogoff (2003) proposes three foci for analysis of socio-cultural activity, Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Cultural-institutional. Together the three foci for analysis (or lenses) constitute the experience: no aspect can be studied in isolation from the other. Analysis of interpersonal relationships would not be able to occur without information about the context in which they are working. At the same time attention is paid to personal processes occurring within the

experience. The observer is also important because the focus of analysis stems from what we as observers choose to examine. “The distinction between what we choose to foreground or background lies in our analysis, and is not assumed to be a separate entity in reality.” (Rogoff, *ibid*).

Intrapersonal lens: the individual is the focus of analysis with interpersonal and cultural institutional information available in the background.

Interpersonal lens: the focus is on what people are doing together, the role they play and the relationships among them. A sense of individual and cultural information is needed to understand what the people are doing.

Cultural/institutional lens: the focus is on cultural institutional processes such as: how practices develop and why, how practices connect with the culture and history and how they evolve. Detail about particular people and their relations with each other are back-grounded.

The use of the three lenses in the ‘recognize’ phase of learning and teaching stories offered teachers a way to discuss the significance of an individual child’s learning in more depth while at the same time acknowledging the influences among the individual, relationships and the learning context. Teachers decided to trial this form of analysis in their documentation of ongoing learning and teaching stories. Through the use of the three lenses for analysis of socio-cultural activity teachers found they could foreground individual children’s learning while at the same time keep their eyes on influential factors such as relationships and centre practices.

Influence 2.4: Carr (1998) Learning stories

Learning Stories as an assessment framework was introduced to the early childhood sector as a result of Margaret Carr’s (1998) research project “*Assessing Children’s Experiences in early Childhood.*” ‘Learning Stories’ are structured narratives that track children’s strengths and interests: they emphasize the aim of early childhood as the development of children’s identities as competent learners in a range of different arenas” (Cowie & Carr, 2005. p.97). Assessment in a learning story involves a formative process in which learning is noticed, recognized and responded to. In the documentation the learning occasion is described (notice), analyzed (recognize), and followed by an indication of how teachers may act on this (respond) to further support the child’s learning. The stories form the basis for discussion among teachers, teachers and parents/whanau and children. Involvement and contribution of all participants is actively invited throughout the process.

The following story is an example of how teachers’ use of the three lenses for analysis enables one child’s learning, or transformation of participation, to be fore-grounded. Michael’s story illustrates the way the three lenses were incorporated into the existing narrative style of documentation. In telling his story it will be seen that all three lenses remain in view to provide the full picture. The story gives information about him (*intrapersonal lens*) while at the same time, information available in the background includes other people he is working with (*interpersonal lens*) and the context he is learning within (*contextual/institutional lens*).