

Chapter 3 - “Doing the hard work” : Relationships

“It’s amazing how differently I now see my role as a teacher and how, through being a teacher/researcher, it has improved my practice, made me comfortable with change. I have become more open and tolerant to others’ opinions, practices and reflections.” (Alana Farrant, teacher researcher)

Introduction

This chapter explores the ‘hard work’ or intentional aspects of being a teacher in a community of learners as teachers develop practices to promote closer relationships with parents. As these relationships develop, dialogue becomes easier and more prevalent in the centre. The chapter tells the story of the teachers’ journey of building parental participation in children’s learning, from the realization that dialogue means two-way communication to establishing practices where mutual communication becomes an expectation within the community. Children’s on-going learning experiences become richer and more meaningful.

Analysis of teacher and parent relationships led the research team to identify a five level framework that illustrates movement from relationships based on uni-directional information-giving to relationships of interdependence. One learning story, set in the centre’s infant and toddler context, is shared to illustrate this framework in action. This story illuminates the interrelationship of teacher/parent dialogue, developing relationships and children’s learning.

An individual teacher’s story describes how her learning about doing the ‘hard work’ is put into action, articulating an understanding of the importance of relationships (espoused) does not mean they will occur. This teacher discovered how doing (enacting) the hard work to build reciprocal and responsive relationships with one family had beneficial outcomes for her as teacher, as well as the parents, child and wider family.

Teacher parent relationships

Relationships is one of the four foundational principles for the early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki: “Children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things.” (p. 43)

During this research exploration a broader understanding of parent teacher relationships develops as we interpret this principle in relation to our community of learners. People learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things. Every member of a learning community has the right to responsive and reciprocal relationships, not just the children in attendance.

A common view in early childhood education is that the main participants in centres are children and teachers. Parents deliver their child to the centre and teachers have responsibility for the child's well-being and learning during their time in the environment. This is not the view we hold in our community of learners. Parents, teachers and children are all participants in learning. Therefore the principle of relationships applies to all. Relationships are the cornerstone of our community of learners.

Relationships among members of the community involve social interaction. In a situation such as a busy early childhood centre, where parents and teachers often have limited opportunity for interaction, relationships with parents can often be paid lip service to, rather than being an area where teachers place their energies. Teachers need to prioritise practices in which they can engage in meaningful and mutually beneficial dialogue. This research team discovered that building partnerships with parents is an intentional part of being a teacher.

Supporting literature describes research which has produced ideas that are similar to ours.

Supporting literature 3.1: Partnerships

Stonehouse and Gonzalez-Mena (2004) discuss the need for strong collaborative partnerships to occur among educators, children and families as a way of building positive relationships within early childhood settings. Some of the elements of effective partnerships are: trust, reciprocal respect, ongoing open communication, empathy, and recognition of partner's strengths. Partnership needs to be a perspective that underpins everything that happens in an early childhood setting.

Doing the hard work – Building parent teacher relationships

Before the research team could explore what collaborative relationships might look like within this early childhood setting it was firstly important to identify the current role that parents played within the centre (discussed in the section on parent identity in Chapter 2). Teachers began their research by exploring the ways parents displayed an interest in project work and what teachers do to promote opportunities for parental participation. The interest in parental participation came about from acknowledging that there are three groups of participants in the centre's community of learners: parents/whanau, children and teachers. While it was evident that children and teachers engage in participating together through project work occurring in the programme, the third partner (parents) was not strongly represented. Teachers wanted to strengthen parental participation.

Documentation as a tool for communication

Documenting project work and children's learning was highly valued by teachers as a means to inform their teaching and learning processes as well as to communicate and celebrate learning with the families. Documentation adorned walls of the centre and also filled individual children's profile books. The existing practice of the centre was that documentation needed to be visual as well as written so that it can be shared between family and centre. Teachers believed it promoted discussion and the sharing of information. Teachers were interested in whether parents valued this documentation; did it contribute to their participation? What other opportunities did parents access?

Research process 3.1: Phase one – teachers write narratives, collated by research associate for discussion

Data gathering involved teachers documenting narrative observations of occasions when parents displayed an interest in project work over a one-month timeframe. The observations were written as narrative stories that contained detail about what parents displayed an interest in, which forms of documentation they accessed and what they did as a result. As observations were documented they were displayed for all team members to view enabling teachers to clarify the occasion with each other. The data was collected by the research associate and collated to present to the teaching team at a team meeting.

Early identification of the importance of relationships

Data gathered during the initial investigation represented 22% of families who use the centre. Teachers identified that they knew the children and adults on the list very well. It was no surprise; the list reflected the established relationships already existing, and provided initial data to reflect on. Parents' active involvement in communication with the centre was occurring through different pathways:

- Looking at and reading project board documentation displays
- Reading their child's profile book
- Joining in children's group time
- Informal personal contact with teachers
- Attending an organized get together.

This early data reinforced to teachers the significance of relationships with parents. Using their knowledge of the learning disposition framework (Carr, 2001) teachers identified a similarity in the ways in which parents move from displaying an interest to becoming involved. The key to building parental participation was for teachers to focus on building practices that create a sense of belonging and well-being in the centre. The use of parents' first names was identified as fundamental to building relationships. Of the 22 parents represented in the data, seven were

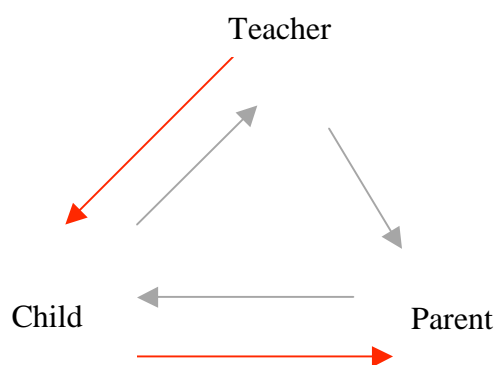
referred to by name. Teachers identified that they need to do the ‘hard work’, remembering names, using them in conversation and providing a welcoming environment in order to build relationships.

Identifying a need to increase two-way communication

The initial data showed that individual children’s profile books were the most frequently accessed avenues for communication. They created a variety of opportunities for parental interest and involvement. These included: reading and talking about it with their child; putting things in the profile book with their child; taking the book home with their child. These parents said that they enjoyed learning about what their child does – art, songs; this was usually followed up by a discussion with a teacher. Through the actions of this small sampling of parents represented in the data, teachers were able to gain insight into possibilities for enhancing their practices to build stronger relationships with all parents/whanau. Documentation in children’s profile books was identified as a form of communication that can promote parental involvement and participation in children’s learning.

The information recorded in the profile books was seen to support parent/child, child/parent and teacher/parent communication. As a result parents became better informed of their child’s participation and learning at the centre. While it was evident that the parents represented in the data communicated with teachers through personal discussions, teachers felt less confident that this was common for all parents. It appeared that one connection was a weak link in the communication triangle, that of parent to teacher.

Exhibit 3.1 Communication triangle



Through further analysis of the data the teacher researcher team became focused on identifying and developing practices to encourage two-way communication with parents. Initial ideas included:

- Strengthening a sense of belonging and well-being for all parents in their relationship with the centre, by taking time to chat with parents; ensuring all teachers know and use parents' first names; complete the new whanau room development and explore possibilities for its use.
- Encourage parents to take their child's profile book home to share with others
- Develop new ways that the profile book can be used to directly communicate with parents and encourage communication from parents e.g. include newsletters & project work updates; add written questions to parents at the end of children's learning stories and/or newsletters
- Make the profile books more accessible to families in the under two area.
- Develop new ways to use display boards to provide parents with opportunities to add their thoughts, comments, and ideas.

Supporting literature 3.2: Collaborative partnerships

Puckett & Diffily (1999) discuss how educators and family members create collaborative partnerships by being willing to make a commitment to teaching and learning and by sharing information that is mutually beneficial.

BINGO: Narratives informing research and practice

Our definition of a BINGO story: a narrative story that describes occasions when all three members of the community (parent, teacher and child) are jointly engaged in shared meaning making.

As teachers analyzed the initial data the concept of BINGO stories developed (refer to page 102 for an example of a BINGO story). Some of the narrative accounts that had been collected were of occasions when parents shared their interest with teachers, with the child also participating in the dialogue. There was often a follow-up action taken by one or more participant as a result of the initial conversation. These stories excited the teaching team. On closer inspection it was seen that the stories described occasions where all three members (parent, child and teacher) of the community were jointly engaged and learning from each other. The term BINGO formed in the process of 'becoming aware' of this mutual engagement in an occasion of inter-subjectivity. Through developing shared understandings each member had in some way been transformed – it was a BINGO experience! BINGO stories contributed to teacher knowledge about practice and cemented the teaching team's vision for the type of community relationships they aspired to.

Supporting literature 3.3: Intersubjectivity

Berk and Winsler (1995) discuss inter-subjectivity as an important quality of good scaffolding.

"A concept introduced by Newson and Newson (1975), inter-subjectivity refers to the process whereby two participants who begin a task with a different understanding arrive at a shared understanding" (p. 27).

The 'task' in the context of the centre regularly related to sharing information about children's learning experiences and coming to understand the significance of the learning and the experience itself. In Rogoff's (2003) words these were

occasions “when mutual understandings occurred between people in interaction: it cannot be attributed to one person or another” (p. 285). The child, parent and teacher had each contributed in some way and had each moved on with a common understanding.

The teacher research team decided to continue to write ‘little narratives’ of learning as they occurred among all three participants of their learning community. These BINGO stories were viewed as valuable documentation that informed regular centre teaching and learning practices. Teachers found that BINGO stories did not stand alone. They were often the first in a string of stories about a child’s learning, which needed to be written as regular learning story practice and included in the child’s profile book. Developing shared understandings appeared to stimulate continued interest in the child’s learning, with participants becoming actively involved in continual teaching and learning practices. The sequential stories represented a social narrative of learning through mutual construction.

Supporting literature 3.4: Constructing stories together – voices of children, parents and teachers

BINGO stories are inclusive of children, parents and teachers. Other researchers make similar links. Arthur, et al. (2005) offer a perspective of socio-cultural theory as encouraging the inclusion of children as co-participants in learning communities rather than as subjects to be talked about and planned for. Further support for our BINGO idea came from Hughes and MacNaughton (2000). They discuss the use of what Lyotard (1984) called ‘little narratives’: these are stories in a localized setting (whether that be home or ECE centre), that acknowledge the expertise of all three participants – child, parent, teacher - and encourage the ‘voices’ of all three participants.

Teachers commented on how useful ‘writing’ had become in supporting their team teaching practices. The documentation was useful as a basis for individual teacher and team reflection, informing relationships with others and as a memory of events over time.

Supporting literature 3.5: Writing narratives

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) offer some understanding into why writing narratives can be advantageous to teachers and their practice.

“Education and educational studies are a form of experience..... narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience. Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it” (p.18).

Teachers involved in writing of their experiences are also involved in thinking about them. When the documentation is shared with others it draws in other perspectives and broadens understandings.

The gradual generation of BINGO stories provoked discussion and dialogue among teachers day-by-day. Sharing stories as they were written enabled all teachers to ‘be a part’ of the unfolding story and raised consciousness of the relationships and resulting benefits. The information strengthened their knowledge and understanding of the occasion and therefore allowed them to ‘enter’ the

relationship. With up to 100 families and a team of eight teachers in this centre, it was often difficult to view the ‘bigger picture’ of relationships with individual parents. These stories made visible the benefits to children’s learning of connecting links between home and centre.

Monitoring the effect of increasing two-way communication

Teachers completed a further process of data collection to monitor the effects of the initiatives implemented to increase two-way communication opportunities for parents. Data collected throughout the course of two projects with children was collated and analyzed by the teacher researcher team. Four categories of the ways in which parents responded were identified: written responses; practical responses; verbal responses; contributing ‘home pages’ to their child’s book.

Research process 3.2: Phase two – monitoring the outcomes of planned initiatives

Two main data gathering tools were used to monitor the outcomes of planned initiatives:

1 Documenting parental responses

A data-recording sheet was used to document parental responses to project letters and children’s learning stories. The data-recording sheet listed every child. Teachers monitored parental responses by ticking whether the response was written, verbal or practical. If verbal or practical, teachers documented a brief description of the event. Copies of written responses made by parents in their child’s profile book were gathered together along with the original communication from teachers (i.e. the learning story or newsletter that had prompted the response). Data was collated by summing up the number and type of response for each parent.

2 Continued collections of written BINGO stories.

The data was collected over the course of two children’s projects involving approximately a five-month period in total. The data was collated and represented by the research associate. Phase one data was presented alongside data from phase two for comparison.

Early evidence of the development of ‘two-way’ communication

During the research process there were times when quantitative research methods proved helpful to give the ‘bigger picture’ of parent participation. By using this process we could see that 54 out of a total of 95 families were represented in the data indicating that 57% of the families were responding in some way to the two-way communication opportunities with teachers. The following tables summarises details.

Exhibit 3.2 Parental responses across two phases

Kind of response	Percentage of parents responding in phase 1	Percentage of parents responding in phase 2	Percentage of parents responding in either phase
Written response	13.7	22	28.5
Verbal or practical response	22	32.5	44
Homepage	6	10.5	15.5

Exhibit 3.3 How individual parents responded

Response categories	Number of parents responding
Written only	5
Written & homepage	5
Written & practical/verbal	12
Written, practical/verbal & homepage	5
Practical/verbal only	21
Practical/verbal & homepage	5
Homepage only	1
Total number of parents	54

Findings 3.1: Increasing parent participation

The number of parents participating in their child’s learning experiences at the centre had dramatically increased since the beginning of the research.

There was an increase in the use of written responses between phase one and two, with more parents choosing this form of communication.

Ten parents repeatedly used written responses as a means of communication.

Most parents chose a combination of ways to respond. Patterns to individual parent responses across the data were classified into seven categories. The range of parental responses indicated that providing different opportunities for communicating enables parents to make a choice to best suit their preferences.

Responding to communications in a practical or verbal way was the most commonly used response to teachers’ communication.

Inclusion of questions from teachers in the documentation contained in children’s profiles contributed to an increase in this response from parents. The questions appear to invite participation.

Findings : Increasing parent participation

Unexpected finding: BINGO stories as a catalyst for change

When initially preparing the data for the teacher researcher team to analyze the head teacher and research associate noticed a difference in tone and writing style across some of the learning stories presented in the raw data. On closer scrutiny it became evident that those stories identified as BINGO stories were written with an underpinning socio-cultural perspective, while a range of regular learning stories appeared to present information with a more developmental perspective.

The head teacher and research associate were provoked to explore with the teacher researcher team why this was so.

A selected range of stories was re-presented for teachers to critique and compare at a team meeting. Using this as a professional development opportunity, teachers provided themselves with information about Barbara Rogoff's (2003) three lenses for analysis from a socio-cultural perspective. The use of these lenses was discussed in more detail in chapter 2. For the purposes of this chapter it is important to recall that the lenses bring into focus individuals, relationships, and the context. What the teacher researcher team discovered was that all three lenses could be used with the BINGO stories whereas some of the other 'stories' only allowed a focus on the child. The following examples of stories illustrate the teacher researchers' discovery. The first story is an example of one of the regular teaching and learning stories.

Albert's learning story 5th Nov. 2003

Written by Liz

Noticing

Albert has settled very quickly into the preschool environment. He loves to play outside especially in the sandpit. Albert has the confidence to choose and experiment with play items, in many different ways. He is learning to play alongside other children and is a very social child. Albert is developing an understanding of the links between the preschool setting and his home environment. He is developing an understanding that preschool is his place to play and mum comes back to pick him up.

Recognizing

Albert is developing an awareness of the connections between home and the preschool setting as the teachers learn more about him and his family. He likes to have conversations about mum and his home, it makes him smile when we say that mum will be back soon.

Responding

We will continue to have conversations with Albert about his family and his home environment. We will encourage Albert to show his family what he does at preschool and let him feel that his family is involved in preschool life as well. We will extend Albert's love of the outside by letting him have happy new experiences on these wonderful warm days.

Teachers' dilemmas – what to put in learning stories

In this first story Albert's learning is 'reported on' to the reader (parent). The information provided to the parent suggests that the teacher has knowledge of what is important about Albert's learning. It is presented in a summative manner with little opportunity for the parent to feel s/he has a place in contributing to or supporting his learning. This style of documentation can be seen to promote a power imbalance in the relationship between teacher and parent. Teachers considered how this style of documentation could also present a view of the child as a learner who is progressing

through predefined developmental criteria, which is in direct conflict with their understanding of the child as a competent, confident learner. In this example Albert appears to be disempowered as a learner. Decisions are made for him and about him.

On further reflection, the teacher researcher team came to view this style of story as a 'one-off snapshot', as it often stood alone without any further connecting information from home or centre. Teachers acknowledged that though they did not use this form of documentation all the time, at times they found themselves 'slipping into' this style. During periods of pressure, teachers found they were reduced to 'generating' documentation for children and parents to meet the centre's expectation that every child's learning would be recorded and discussed with parents.

The second example, as follows, is a BINGO story. The narrative describes the full story of Albert's learning experience and acknowledges the critical role parent and teacher play in this. Albert's participation is central to the story.

Albert 11th Feb. 2004 - a BINGO story

Written by Christina

This morning as Albert arrived with his mum (Mandi) he was a little sad for her to leave. So I, (Christina) found the book 'The wheels on the bus' for a story and sing-a-long. I explained to Mandi how Albert loves to hear stories and joins in with singing and actions. Mandi exclaimed "*Albert loves the Fimbles and the song with actions called Wibble Wobble!*" Albert had a big smile and twinkle in his eye. Mum sang a verse of the song with actions and I asked "*where did you hear about this song and could you write it out for us?*" Lots of talking occurred as mum explained, with Albert all eyes and smiling. Both of us (teachers) said to Mandi how we appreciate his enthusiasm and input to group times. Mandi left promising to print out the song for us from the BBC internet site.

At morning tea time we sang with the children - open shut them and twinkle twinkle little star. I asked Albert if he wanted to choose a song and then remembered the 'Fimbles' song his mum had mentioned. I mentioned this song to Albert and sang what I could remember. Albert had a broad smile and began to quietly sing also. We sang along together and then said to Albert "*when mum comes with the words for your song we will all sing it with you*". He smiled.

Twelve o'clock came and Mandi came in with the print out of the Fimbles' Wibble Wobble song! Mum and Albert were proud and happy to share their song with the actions and it was lovely to see the happy connection with his mum, his friends at preschool and the teachers.

The song is on our project board for all to learn and we will be singing it often, as all the children appeared to like it. Ka pai Albert and Mandi, thank-you for sharing.

Teachers' dilemmas – what to put in learning stories

This example was considered to be a more user-friendly approach to writing stories of children's learning. It was illustrative of a real, meaningful learning occasion. The three headings; notice,

recognize, and respond, had not been used in this story. Teachers reflected on how removal of the framework in documentation allows them to write in a free narrative style. They considered the framework of the process was firmly embedded in teacher practice so that the three steps of the process would be evident in every piece of writing teachers do. In Albert's example above teachers have recognized his enjoyment and interest in singing familiar songs and the supporting role his Mum had in this. They have also indicated how they intend to respond to his learning by "singing it often".

Reflecting on the differences in the way they depicted the child in each of the stories teachers referred to the first as the 'developing' child and the second as the 'social' child, as the text of the second story places the child's participation in a social context. It is a conversational style that includes parental comments or acknowledgement of parental participation. Teachers considered this style of documentation would 'speak' directly to parents as if one were having a face-to-face conversation.

Data analysis as a catalyst for change

The process of analysis involved teachers in the use of real data from their work in the centre. The stories could not be argued with, nor questioned as inaccurate data. The experience challenged teachers and became a catalyst for change in practice. The BINGO stories had provided a rich insight into learning experiences and provided information teachers could use to support further learning. They were also viewed as supportive of relationships between home and centre. The one-off snapshot learning stories presented were not. The outcome was that all teachers held a clear vision for their documentation practices. They knew what they wanted to avoid, and what to aim for, in presenting stories to their community.

Through discussion, the term BINGO developed dual meanings for the research team. BINGO stories, as discussed above, informed and enlightened teachers in developing a collective vision for building relationships through documentation. A new use of the word BINGO developed as a result of ongoing research activity. Use of the term BINGO became evident during analytical discussions, when the collective group experienced an 'aha' moment; "we've got it, we understand!" These occasions were described as a 'BINGO moment'.

Our definition of the term **BINGO moment**: a moment of collective realization and insight. BINGO moments are when a group of people develop shared understandings about underpinning beliefs, values or perspectives of pedagogical practice.

Research process 3.3: Capturing insights and sharing ideas together

A new term was coined and adopted by the teacher researcher team. Even although we were not aware of this at the time, the term BINGO came to shift in meaning and understanding as new knowledge emerged. The teacher researcher team realized that part of the process of creating new knowledge is refining definitions of terms. Through team discussions, collective understandings developed that needed a word to convey the shared meaning. We created a word and meaning that wasn't there before. New knowledge, created in the centre, is expressed and understood through the term BINGO.

The impact of the analysis process on teachers is illustrated in this brief account about one teacher's reaction – her BINGO moment. This particular teacher was present at the research meeting mentioned above. She had been listening intently at the meeting, and then suddenly got up and went out to get some of the children's profile books, she came back into the room and opened them. She was quietly observing a variety of learning stories she had written, and then said something that had a profound effect on the way children's learning was to be viewed and documented within the centre from that moment forth.

These are her words as she reflects back on that meeting:

Over 85% of my learning stories that I have written were 'true' learning stories – moments when a light bulb flashed and I knew I had witnessed some learning that was significant to that child. However the remaining 15% of learning stories didn't follow this framework. For children who I didn't really know, or I was aware lacked a recent learning story, I 'fabricated' a learning story. This style of learning story was simply a narrative of what I had observed about the child. For instance, how they had settled in, how they adapted to routines etc. I never felt comfortable with this style of writing but felt a duty to write something about that child if there was nothing current in the book. (Teacher reflection, Nov.05)

After this particular teacher had noted the difference between the 'light bulb moment' style of documentation, and the 'fabricated story' – it allowed the teaching team as a whole to acknowledge and own up to sometimes writing the fabricated settling-in stories themselves. The team vowed and declared never to write a fabricated story again! The participatory research process adopted by the research team has allowed teachers to truly discover for themselves the significance of documentation in relation to relationship building.

Coming into view: Communication as a foundation to building partnership relationships

The previous research process had led the teacher researcher team to understandings of how their practice was influential on developing relationships with their community. The ‘hard work’ of teachers is more than obligatory communication. The efforts put into creating opportunities for authentic and purposeful communication between teacher and parents/whanau have beneficial outcomes for the whole community. It became useful to relate developing understanding to a framework, offered by MacNaughton and Hughes (2003), which enabled the teacher researcher team to describe the different types of relationships experienced in the centre through the research process, and the type of relationship this team was aiming for.

Supporting literature 3.6: Relationships

MacNaughton and Hughes (2003) identify three different relationships between educators and families:

Conforming is where the educator is viewed as the expert who can teach families about child development and appropriate experiences for children. Within this type of relationship the educator is perceived to hold all the knowledge, therefore *knowledge is a one-way process from teacher to parent*.

Reforming is where teachers and family members collaborate to share information about the children; this might be done in a verbal, written or visual way.

Transforming is where collaborative partnerships are encouraged to occur, where family members are invited to play an extensive part in their child’s learning process.

Initially teachers in this early childhood centre began their written documentation journey by ‘telling’ the parents about learning experiences that occurred for their child; there was little room for reply. However, results from the early data collection process began to show that the use of direct written questions to parents at the end of a teaching and learning story contributed to increasing parental participation in children’s learning experiences. As two-way communication increased, relationships moved from ‘conforming’ to ‘reforming’. The changes made to the way in which teachers documented children’s learning stories also ‘shifted’ the image of the teacher as the expert in the relationship. The addition of meaningful comments and questions to parents provided the space for parents to enter conversations with teachers in the knowledge that their opinion and views were valued.

In the reforming relationship, two-way sharing of information became embedded in centre practices. The parent-initiated contributions of information from home (homepages) suggested that ‘shared ownership’ of children’s profile books had occurred. Project work with children and the supporting documentation provide a shared area of interest for all adults in the child’s world, drawing them

together with the child's learning as the common goal. The child's profile book was the vehicle for sharing this interest between home and centre.

Teachers reflected on how individual parent responses to their child's learning stories appeared to be associated with their child's increasing confidence to participate and contribute to a project exploration. A definite two-way process was occurring between home and centre as parents were supporting their children to contribute in practical ways by bringing resources, and sharing in discussion with teachers. During this early project work participation, there were also signs of parents choosing to participate as 'experts'.

The third style of relationship between educator and parent, *transforming*, became visible as a broader understanding of parental participation in children's learning experiences emerged. As explained in chapter 2, participation was not always visible in the centre. The teacher researcher team gained a view of how participation takes on different forms in different contexts at different times. Within the transforming relationship, collaborative partnerships are encouraged to occur, and family members are invited to play an extensive part in their child's learning process. Developing this type of relationship is what the teacher researcher team recognizes as being the 'hard work' for teachers. It challenges the traditional view of the teacher parent relationship. Mac Naughton and Hughes (2003) say that within the *transforming* relationship, traditional knowledge-power links between educator and parents are challenged as there is no 'fixed body of knowledge' about children that teachers have and parents lack. Within this type of relationship, teachers focus on sharing and 'negotiating' knowledge, and parents have real voice and expertise.

Developing a culture of dialogue

The teacher researcher team formed the view that transforming relationships develop within a culture of dialogue in the centre. Use of the term 'dialogue' enabled the teacher researcher team to differentiate between 'passing' or 'playful' exchanges (Smith, M. 2003) and those that engage participants in meaning-making and shared understandings over time. The intention of the teacher researcher team was not to neglect the importance of the more passing conversations but to bring into focus the culture of ongoing meaningful conversations, dialogue. The communication practices the team implemented were seen to be ones that could cultivate parental participation in their child's learning. Documentation, visual representations and personal communications combined to provide pathways to participate in dialogue. They are all forms of conversation that together can

create a flow on effect from one to the other. This fluidity in conversation is how the teacher researcher team came to view the culture of dialogue that was forming in the centre.

Supporting literature 3.7: Conversation and dialogue

Smith, M. (2003) offered useful insights into differences between conversation and dialogue. Smith critiques and discusses four academic writers' interpretations of the term dialogue. He summarized by suggesting that educators "should not make too much of the differences between conversation and dialogue." The academic debate was suggestive of dialogue occurring as a formalized process, which is not in keeping with the types of activities that informal and community educators are involved in. In his opinion "conversation like dialogue is, at heart, a 'kind of social relation that engages its participants' (Burbles 1993: 19). The act of engaging with another – whatever the subject matter – is significant in itself." One point made by Smith strongly resonated with this teacher researcher team's experience:

"local educators engage in activities directed towards discovery and new understanding (what Burbles 1993:8 describes as 'dialogue'), but they are also concerned with being and belonging. Here, seemingly trivial exchanges are of central importance and if neglected lead to major problems. Dialogue in the sense that Freire uses the term is only one element of the work local educators do" (p8).

Dialogue, relationships, parental participation and children's learning

The remainder of this chapter is made up of two stories that illustrate how the teacher researcher team utilized their new knowledge and understandings about developing relationships with parents/whanau. As they worked together, they gained fresh understandings, they talked more, and further ideas and theories emerged. The infant toddler team story brings into relief the interrelationship of teacher/parent dialogue, developing relationships, parental participation and children's learning. The five level framework presented emerged as teachers analyzed their work on the basis of reading Rogoff's (2003) ideas on the use of an interpersonal focus of analysis.



The link between dialogue and developing relationships: The infant toddler story – an individual project

Author Debbie, April 2005

The infant and toddler area has eight children at any one time, and two teachers. There is a half door that separates the infant toddler and over-two area, where there are 31 two to five year old children. There is a large viewing window, taking up

The infant toddler story ... As told by Debbie

almost a whole side of the main dividing wall, allowing the children in the infant and toddler area to watch the older children play on the ‘big side’.

In principle, the infant and toddler area is designed specifically for under-two aged children only. Under the New Zealand Early Childhood Education regulations we are required to provide separate space for children under the age of two years old. However, as the teaching team began to view all members of the early childhood centre as part of a learning ‘community’, there was a change in the way the teachers viewed this restricted infant and toddler space. For quite some time now, children of all ages can request to either come into the infant and toddler area or leave the area. Older children do this verbally, whereas the younger children initiate this action non-verbally by standing at the door. As project work (or inquiry based learning) continues in the infant and toddler environment it invites the participation of the older children as well as that of the infant and toddlers.

Inviting opportunities for shared engagement

Project work in our centre provides opportunity for shared engagement in children’s learning. Teachers and parents share the children’s endeavors with each other through a process of documentation and conversation, and through this process participation grows. The multiple layers of project work and participation that occur within the infant and toddler environment are supported by relationships and practices that facilitate meaningful links between the home and centre. The teaching team believes that the learning community within which they operate extends far further than the four walls of this centre: it includes the homes and lives of the families who make up the community of learners as a whole. The pedagogical practices of documentation and verbal communication co-exist to create a culture of dialogue that supports this particular community of learners.

A framework for learning supported by dialogue, documentation and mutual engagement

As the infant and toddler teachers worked with children and their parents, the teacher/researcher team identified a framework (the New Beginnings Preschool Framework, (NBPF)) that explored how levels of documentation assist levels of relationship. The teacher researcher team noticed that strengthened levels of socio-cultural documentation encouraged strengthened levels of mutual engagement and

dialogue between the teacher and parent – between home and centre. Mutual engagement between home and centre was exemplified within the infant and toddler’s environment as teachers put the focus on the *social individual*. Teachers explored the work of Barbara Rogoff’s (2003) *transformation of participation perspective*; putting a socio-cultural *intra-personal lens of analysis* on the individual child, their family and their home environment.

New Beginnings Preschool Framework (NBPF) for dialogue, documentation and mutual engagement

Level one: *One-way information giving* – verbal: Parent developing trust in the relationship

Level Two: *Information giving and response* – verbal and written: Sharing an interest

Level Three: *Verbal dialogue*: Mutual engagement and respect

Level Four: *Documented dialogue*: Strengthened engagement and respect

Level Five: *Continuous two way documented and verbal dialogue*: Shared responsibility and interdependence

A *teaching and learning story* format will be used to illustrate the ‘mutual engagement’ framework in action. It will also be seen that the teacher researchers applied Rogoff’s (2003) *intra-personal lens of analysis* to the teaching and learning of a child within their setting, that is, the focus has been put on one child, his family, and the ECE setting. Casey's story illustrates the progress of developing relationships with one child’s parent though the five stages listed above.

Supporting literature 3.8: Culturally responsive interactions

Arthur et al. (2005), talks about the importance of this first stage of the framework where an exchange of information about the child occurs. There is also an initial exchange of information as the parent enrolls the child. Enrolment time can be used to gather meaningful information about the child’s family context, expectations and values. Information is gathered about relevant family members, and other adults who play an important role in the child’s life. Arthur et al. (ibid) continues to say that it is important to find out about children’s every day experiences and interests, so that the programme can become culturally responsive and relevant for the child.

Introducing Casey...

Casey is a young boy who not only was having difficulty parting from his mother at the beginning of the session, but remained quite anxious throughout the entire session.

Casey's mum's name is Trudy. At the time, Casey was 20 months old. During this early unsettled period Trudi described Casey as being an "*extremely clingy, very unhappy wee man... He was very lost without Mum and Dad and exhausted from his distress when he came home (from the centre)*".

Casey's story begins ... Level 1: **One-way information giving – verbal**

Teacher reflections about Casey, March 05

Authors - Debbie and Dawn

When Casey first started attending the centre he would arrive with his mum at lunch time, well after the other children were settled in the highchairs or at the table for lunch. This was always a hurried experience for both Casey and mum, with Trudi relaying such messages as – "*Casey might be tired, he might not eat his lunch, he might want a sleep, etc..*" Everyone was a little tense, as we all knew Casey would be extremely upset the minute mum left. Trudi would leave quite quickly as she would often be running late. Before she left we would try to reassure her that everything would be all right, and that we would ring her if necessary.

Similarities can be seen between the NBPF framework created by the research team and the three types of relationships discussed earlier: *conforming*, *reforming* and *transforming* (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2003). The first two levels of the framework sit firmly within the *conforming* type or relationship where knowledge is a one-way process between parent to teacher or teacher to parent. In our interpretation of the conforming relationship we differ from that of

MacNaughton and Hughes. We acknowledge that in the early stages of a relationship the

NBPF - Level one: One-way information giving – verbal Parent developing trust in the relationship

- the parent informs the teacher about the needs of their child
- the teacher reassures the parent that they have understood this important care-giving information that the parent is passing on
- this always occurs at the beginning of the child's attendance.

parent holds knowledge that is important to share with the teacher. This knowledge is usually situated within the child's immediate need for care. At this time the parent is the expert.

Casey's story continues ... Level 2: **Information giving and response – verbal and written: Sharing an interest**

Teacher reflections about Casey, March 05

Authors – Debbie and Dawn

We were very careful as to how we recorded the fact that Casey would take quite some time to settle, but we believed in being honest with Trudi and in her own words she described Casey as “extremely clingy”. When Trudi returned we would tell her honestly about Casey's afternoon with us, pulling out the highlights and reassuring her that as time goes by his anxiety will lessen, and he will begin to trust Dawn and myself. Often this communication was supported with a learning and teaching story in Casey's profile book. Establishing a relationship with Trudi at this stage was very important. We were not going to gain Casey's trust if we didn't first gain her trust. If he can see this relationship forming it will model good practice and allow him more choices.

This narrative illustrates the way that one-way communication occurs, from teacher to parent. The teacher at this time shares information about the child's time at the centre, the teacher has the 'expert' knowledge. This one-way communication can be both verbal and documented.

NBPF - Level Two: Sharing an interest

Information giving and response – verbal and written -

- the teacher shares information about the child's day with the parent
- regular written Teaching and Learning stories in the child's profile supports the verbal communication
- the parent shows interest in this information and they may respond by talking about any new experiences they have noticed their child doing lately at home
- this generally occurs at the end of the child's session.

Taken from a learning and teaching story – 3.2.05

Author - Debbie

Developing Relationships

It was first thing in the morning and Casey's mum was settling Casey in for his session... We talked about creativity in very young children and the belief that the under-two teachers have in having visual arts occurring for the children every day. Trudi told us that she enjoyed art and music herself, and that while she is seeing the musical ability come through to some of her children, she would love to see that love of art occur maybe for Casey. Trudi said that she was keen on developing an area for Casey outside so that he could paint, draw etc. I said that is what we do at the centre – visual art seems to work well outside. Trudi talked about maybe bringing her electronic piano into the centre, and I told her about how we have a group time at 11.45 and that would be a really good time.

Throughout the session we noticed that if Casey was near either Dawn or me then he was quite happy. We talked about encouraging that closeness and bond to occur, rather than trying to encourage him to be 'independent'. It seemed that as long as he was aware that a trusted adult was within near distance, he was then able to safely explore his environment. We will be working with Casey closely at developing this trusting relationship, while at the same time talking with Trudi and developing our relationship with her more as well. I'm sure that the more Casey sees the teachers and his mum relating together, the stronger his sense of well-being will be.

Trudi we would love to have you in to play your piano at the centre sometime, and maybe share your art and/or some photos of Casey doing his art at home.

It can be seen from the above narrative that verbal dialogue is now occurring between Trudi, and the teachers, and we are beginning to establish a relationship of two-way communication with each other. Creating a 'culture' of dialogue with parents is an important pedagogical practice in the infant and toddler environment. The teacher research team found the best time for this to occur is when the parents are bringing their children in

at the beginning of a session.

As the on-going communication and documentation process continues it can be seen that a ‘transformation of participation’ (Rogoff, 2003) is occurring between the parent and teacher.

NBPF - Level Three: Verbal dialogue

Mutual engagement and respect

- the teacher and parent communicate *with each other* using a two-way process of communication
- the teacher reflects on what she has have noticed in the child’s current learning and discusses experiences that can be offered to the child in relation to the child’s emerging learning
- the parent responds by reflecting how the child may be involved in similar experiences at home or how they might be able to extend these experiences to occur at home
- this contextual information assists both the parent and the teacher to be able to understand what the child’s current *learning project* looks like

this generally happens in that quiet ‘chat’ time at the beginning of the child’s session and at the end of the child’s session.

Supporting literature 3.10: A transforming relationship

This type of relationship is what MacNaughton and Hughes (2003) calls a *transforming* relationship. A ‘knowledge’ shift is occurring as both parent and teacher are acknowledging each other’s expertise when it comes to the child’s learning.

The continuation of Casey's Learning Story illustrates the value of the fourth level of communication: written and visual dialogue. Casey’s story continues ...

Level 4: Documented dialogue: Strengthened engagement and respect

Taken from a learning and teaching story – 15.2.05

Author – Debbie

It’s been important for Casey that he begins to feel a sense of security while at the centre. The teachers are building a relationship with Trudi as well as Casey. This is important for Casey so that he begins to understand that this is a trusted place to be, and that it is OK to leave mum for a short time. It’s been interesting to talk with Trudi, as we build up a picture

of Casey's life away from the centre. Trudi talked about having the art easel at home for Casey, and that Casey's dad noticed that Casey was happy and content at this activity as long as he was near him (we've noticed the same at the centre).

I took these two photos to show that although Casey was upset when leaving mum during this particular session (he did need the constant contact with either myself or Dawn on this particular day) there were times when he was completely content. These were the 'routine' times of the day when Casey was in the highchair eating his



morning-tea, and when he was having his bottle in the pram. His hand up in the air is indicating his contentedness. The second picture shows us the 'bigger picture' where Casey was sitting alongside another child Bradlee, and Casey was very happy with this close contact. We will continue to closely record Casey's development as he realizes that he can have trusting and secure relationships with the two under-two teachers, and then broaden this trust out to his other friends.

In the story above it can be seen how discussions that the teachers have had with Trudi have been 'fed back' to her, and describes how this is slowly impacting on Casey's learning.

The value in closely tracking a child's journey by regularly documenting it to share with others has tremendous potential for the developing interest of the 'social individual'. Showing this through visual as well as written documentation speaks to everyone in a way that words cannot. In a recent parent survey we asked what parents valued as the most effective form of documentation. Photos were judged the most effective with the narrative 'learning and teaching story' process coming a close second.

NBPF - Level Four: Documented dialogue

Strengthened engagement and respect

- documentation adds a deeper and more complex level to the communication process as the child's on-going project is followed by both parent and teacher
- the teacher documents the child's learning project over time as it emerges
- photographs are used to assist parent and child to re-visit the learning with family members at home; photographs also help visually communicate the relationships that are developing for the child, causing another source of communication between family and child
- a previous dialogue between the parent and teacher is often used in the narrative story to affirm the connections made between home and centre, and the powerful effect this has on their child's learning
- sometimes a written question is asked of the parents at the end of the learning story, acting as a responding - 'where to next?' for their child
- at this stage we may see parents responding to this in-depth documentation process by contributing information and/or photos of their child involved in similar learning experiences at home.

The infant toddler story ... As told by Debbie

Supporting literature 3.11: Different ways of communicating

Arthur et al. (2005) talk about offering different forms of communication styles for parents, as for some parents written communication will be appropriate, whereas for others it may be more suitable to share information verbally. Helm and Katz (2001) talk about how the documentation process can often inspire parents to carry on a project focus or discussions at home, where parents contribute resources that relate to the focus and join in experiences and excursions.

Casey's story concludes ... Level 5: Increasing relationships.

Continued from the learning and teaching story 15.2.05

Author – Debbie

Debbie, Dawn and Trudi had spent the first half hour of the session talking together, and in this time Casey played happily alongside his mum and his brother. Casey was still a little unsure when mum left.



We decided it would be better for him to go outside with Dawn as it was quite active inside with some of the older children. Casey indicated to Dawn that he wanted to go over to the over-two side, and so she went with him. When I came back from my morning tea break Casey was being very brave walking along a plank raised above the ground. We continued to spend time outside on the over-tvos when everyone went in, and then it was time to come in for morning tea. Normally Casey sits in the high chair, but something told me he would now think he was a big boy and might enjoy sitting at the table. After morning tea, Casey showed an interest in a number of activities that were on offer inside. He especially enjoyed pulling the car track apart and curiously wondering what it was for. After this we moved over to the large glass that looks through to the over-tvos. We saw Christina, and she saw us. We waved to Christina,

and she waved back. And then an amazing thing happened... as some other children were indicating that they wanted to go through to the over-tvos inside, and Casey was by my side – he went through as well! Straight over to Christina. He spent quite some time interacting with her – he knows Christina from when she taught on the infant toddler side last year, she's another familiar adult to him. It wasn't long before Casey was interacting with other children with Christina near by. He waved back to me a few times, completely happy in his new found independence! Great work Casey!

The infant toddler story ... As told by Debbie

Trudi's response (below) illustrates the deeper and more complex verbal dialogue that now occurs between herself and the infant and toddler teachers.

Trudi's response to Casey's transformation (30.2.05)

It's awesome watching Casey, our 20 month old son, burst through the door at New Beginnings Pre-school and announce his presence to everyone. He races straight to the over two "big-boy" area and takes in his surroundings. This is such a far cry from the extremely clingy, very unhappy wee man, exhausted from his distress when he came home. He now looks forward to his morning at crèche and runs to grab his bag when I say the word. His confidence has grown unbelievably both here and at home. His vocabulary has tripled and he is a lot more definite about what he wants (and what he doesn't want!) We have also noticed a huge change in him at home too. He's learnt to 'trade' toys with his older brother Devon (4), and is quite often the centre of games between himself, Devon and older sister India (11). We know this is because of his nurturing and educating care at New Beginnings Pre-school. Debbie, Dawn and Lorraine (and all other staff) are both comforting and very encouraging when it comes to trying new things. I believe that the key to this is that his lovely caregivers keep the lines of communication up between themselves and the parents. They take a huge interest in what works for us at home, and will then try to incorporate that into his learning and play at crèche. They also have ideas for what may help me, as a parent. Debbie, Dawn and Lorraine - Casey just loves you - and so do we!!! Thank you for caring so much about our son. We are so grateful!!

Mum and Dad (Trudi and Shane.)

The infant toddler story ... As told by Debbie

Supporting literature 3.12: Documentation

Arthur et al. (2003) describe how "documentation makes children's ideas and thinking visible to children, families and teachers ... Photographs, brief explanatory narrative and learning stories provide opportunities for families and children as well as staff to revisit and reflect on experiences" (p.58). Documentation provides opportunities for teachers and families to collaborate together in a process of exchanging ideas, sharing insights and information and working together to make joint decisions for children's learning....

These processes promote collaborative partnerships that are respectful and inclusive of diverse perspectives and that foster dialogue where issues can be discussed and changes to practices suggested in a climate of open communication. (Arthur et al., 2003, p. 58)

NBPF Level Five: Shared responsibility and interdependence

Continuous two way documented and verbal dialogue

- a very complex picture is now being developed as the parent and teacher communicate in written, visual and verbal form
- teaching and learning becomes a shared process between the home and centre
- parent interest extends beyond their own child's learning; parent to parent dialogue about programme experiences occurs
- parents may be seen to take initiative for curriculum decisions.

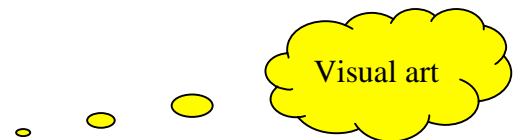
Relationships and dialogue illuminate 'transformations of participation'

In an earlier paper, Ryder & Wright (2004) described the teacher researcher team's understanding of a community of learners by quoting Rogoff (1994): "*(It) is based on the premise that learning and development occurs as people participate in shared endeavors with others*" (p.1). The later work of Rogoff (2003), in particular her three analytical lenses - intra-personal, interpersonal, cultural/institutional - has aided the teaching research team to uncover multiple layers of participation or learning occurring within their early childhood context. Rogoff's (ibid) transformation of participation perspective has allowed them to 'put words' to a strengthening understanding of the socio-cultural relationships that occur both in and out of their centre environment.

Casey's story has illustrated how a *transformation of participation* occurred for all involved within his teaching and learning. Casey's transformation was evident in his physical use of the early childhood environment as he progressed from needing to always be near his mother, to needing the support of his infant and toddler teachers, to his full exploration of the centre (including the 'big side'). Through strengthened relationships with Trudi, we saw her transform from a parent who would quickly bring Casey in to the centre and then leave, to a parent who would regularly sit and talk with the teachers for at

least half an hour. The teachers' transformation has been illustrated in how their pedagogical practices of documentation and verbal communication developed to become dialogues that supported the community of learners as a whole.

Through dialogue we can 'hear' the multiple voices of our community and work collaboratively in support of children's learning. When we don't hear, our sense of community is lost.



Relationships in action in the area of visual art: Alana's story of learning

In this section, 'Alana's story of learning', an individual teacher describes what she has learnt about relationships through her involvement with a child in visual art. Alana had been developing her own abilities in working with children in the area of visual art. In this story she is challenged in her learning about being a co-learner in art.

Through earlier investigations into visual art teaching and learning, teachers became aware of how, in their own learning experiences, they tended to seek out relationships with others with whom they felt an affinity to their approach to art, someone who knew them well and in whom they had confidence. This understanding is echoed in the relationship between teacher and child in this story.

Building the transformative type of relationship between parent and teacher can occur in any area of the early childhood curriculum. In this story, a child is using visual art to represent his ideas. Alana transfers her learning about building relationships with parents through communication practices that share the excitement of the child's learning. The child's learning becomes a shared process between home and centre.

Learning to be a co-learner: Challenging my role in the visual arts

Alana's Story of Learning

Author Alana, 28th November 2005

Introduction

Through my participation in the centre's research explorations of visual art in the centre my own teaching practices have been challenged. I arrived at New Beginnings with limited experience and skill in visual arts but with an interest and desire to see visual arts more in early childhood education. I believed that I had come well equipped with all the ideas and activities needed to incorporate visual arts into an EC centre. At that time I 'knew' it wasn't about the product but the experience. I 'knew' not to ask a child what they were drawing; I also 'knew' that too much input and assistance from me could hinder children's creativity. This thinking was evident in the way I documented learning stories at that point. The following example illustrates a typical response from one of those earlier learning stories:

Continue to provide assistance (e.g. holding nails) and support her ideas. Extend her thinking by providing books with different forms of transportation. Discuss together the processes, as she is involved in these tasks. Extend thinking and encourage conversation...

I believed my role as a teacher was to scaffold children's learning. I was aware of providing support, encouraging and giving assistance but only when needed or initiated by the child.

The action research process our teaching team has been involved in has challenged me to move beyond the comfortable space I held as the 'facilitator' of a child's experience. I became really interested in exploring the part I play in children's art experiences. I looked at how I responded to children's artwork, how I was displaying it. Was I allowing enough time for children to make decisions on tasks they are involved in? Was I giving too much input? Was I encouraging children's ideas and thoughts to be represented visually? Do I have enough knowledge in this area to confidently communicate, guide and teach skills (to encourage visual arts)?

As a result I have developed my understanding of what co-construction looks like in practice. My image of the child changed as I began seeing every day that children are

confident competent learners. My relationships with children, and their families, have been strengthened through constructing with children rather than ‘teaching them’ or keeping myself one-step removed from them. Continuity in children’s learning, both within the centre and between centre and home has emerged as a beneficial outcome of my investigation. My view of myself as teacher in the area of visual art made a dramatic shift, as I will share through the stories told in this paper.

Background to my Journey

As a teaching team we began our research exploration by discussing our visual art experiences at team meetings. It became evident that individually we had different approaches and attitudes to visual arts. Our approaches and attitudes have become clearer to us through participating in team art workshops, reflecting upon our personal history and through looking back over our collection of learning stories about visual art experiences of the past year.

The team art workshops involved us as a team meeting together after work and working on a piece of art. We chose the media we wanted to use. Some of us came equipped with an idea in mind and with materials while others sat down in front of a blank canvas and paints with no idea in mind. Following each workshop we recorded our personal reflection about these times and then met as a group to share. Alongside this we have gained a deeper insight into ourselves as artists through reflectively writing about our personal history and prior influences in relation to art. These too have been shared at team meetings. We found our relationships have been strengthened as we began to understand each other in a more intimate way. This knowledge of each other has enabled us to acknowledge and respect each other’s strengths and vulnerabilities in a way that was not evident earlier.

My interest in visual art had been spurred. I began building my own content knowledge in visual arts by reading various literatures on the topic. I began reflecting upon my practice and the practice of others through team discussions and informal discussions with colleagues. I began to really understand the concept of co- construction and was noticing it when it was in my practice and when it wasn’t. I was noticing things that I hadn’t before.

As a team we had made quite a significant shift in the ways that we documented children’s learning stories around the same time as we became involved in our action

research into visual art. This change involved both the content and presentation of stories. We began to write stories using Barbara Rogoff's (2003) three lenses for analysis. This helped us to reflect on each story from an intra-personal, inter-personal and cultural institutional perspective. In other words it allowed us to see the entire picture. I was no longer observing only the child: this approach required me to see the entire context of the child's learning, including myself in the frame. Changes to the presentation of stories meant that we held more poetic license; we removed the headings; (notice, recognize and respond), to allow for a freer flow in our writing. The three-step process was firmly embedded in our practice and would be evident in each of the stories we wrote. It was just that using the headings sometimes impeded the flow of one story to another, particularly for the reader (namely, our parents).

By collecting and analyzing learning stories in relation to the visual arts over the year we became aware of our individual style of writing about the visual arts, how we had progressed or changed, and how our attitudes and approach came across in our stories. Through this process I was able to see how my approach to engaging with children in visual art changed. It became evident that I had gained confidence in my belief and approach to the visual arts. I had become empowered in this area with the understanding that I was co-constructing, not interfering with the creative process of a child.

My teacher: Blake

Many of my current practices, and what I have come to value, are made visible through one child's stories involving visual arts. Blake's story began in February this year (2005), when he announced he would like me to make a car, "A Holden!" And so the projects began, first with a Red Holden then a Spiderman Aeroplane followed by a Shark boat and what began as a Fireboat. When reflecting on these stories I wondered whether Blake was motivated more by the experience of working together and being involved, having an idea and achieving it rather than doing this for the experience of being creative. This had been my experience of our teacher workshops where I got satisfaction from the experience but while working on an idea. The experience for me had more to do with the surroundings than 'creating with collage'. I didn't enjoy the experience of our first workshop at all because I felt uncomfortable. It was new, we didn't know or feel comfortable talking about each other's work or giving input, there was limited space and I was rushed. I really enjoyed the last workshop experience because we had talked about it

and realized we had all felt the same. I felt more comfortable with people seeing my work and giving input; there was more space; I was enjoying the quietness with music in the background and I had more time. This was the first thing that I identified in my practice. Visual art was more than being creative or having ‘an experience’. It was, in fact, also a tool that children use to persevere with projects, convey ideas and to work in collaboration with others.

My Learning

Blake’s 1st story taught me about how valuable offering ideas can be.

Blake’s Red Holden!

February 2005

Day 1
One afternoon when I was in the art room, Blake came in announcing he would like me to make him a car, “A Holden!” I said to him that he could make a Holden himself and that I could help him. First of all we sat down together and discussed this Holden he wanted to make. I said we should write it down as our plan to help us. As I hung this on the wall Blake drew a picture of the Holden he was to make. He pointed to the parts which he had mentioned in his plan.



We found a large box for the body of the car and talked about what we could use for wheels. As the day was coming to an end we found a safe place for the box and hung up his picture along with the plan. We were ready to begin the next day!

Blake then set to work painting it shiny red! As he was working away busily, he would inform children what he was making and of course talking about Holden’s! At the end of the day he was very happy to hang it up to dry and leave it for another day.



Day 2
The next afternoon Blake came running into the art room. “I want to do my car”, he exclaimed. Together we stuck the wheels on with cellotape.

Day 3
Blake wanted to continue his car that morning I asked if he was happy to finish it that afternoon when I was going to be in the art room. He was very happy to do so, and came

running in straight after lunch. "I want my car....and I am going to paint inside as well". I brought down his car. We found that the wheels were falling off. Blake set to work sticking them back down. He also added some more paint. When he had finished I pointed out to him the plan and read it aloud, "oh the boot", he exclaimed. We found a box we thought would be a great boot and together we stuck it on. He then set straight to work painting it. By this time Blake was getting a wee following! Children were popping in and out to chat and observe Blake's Holden. Blake was very happy to talk to them as he was building and painting. Blake was excited as we hung it up as he knew tomorrow we were able to add the "shoulder straps".



What a great Holden Blake!

Day 4

In the morning Blake came running over to me and asked if he could have his Holden. I bought it down for him and asked Libby if she could help Blake with the shoulder straps as I had to go outside. Libby was very keen to help and together the shoulder straps were fastened! Finally The Holden was finished and Blake, who was very proud, spent the entire day driving around preschool in it. (I heard from Mum the following week that this continued at home also!)



Blake I am so proud of such a wonderful job you did constructing and painting your red Holden! I loved the way you knew what you wanted for your plan and referred back to this and your picture. You showed much commitment to this project and persevered each day to complete it. You enjoyed interacting with other children during this process and talking about Holden's. I think it's fair to say you won't be an owner of a Ford in the future! I know you had lots of fun driving around in it. Well done Blake!

I wonder what we could make next....

As a participant in Blake's work I became comfortable giving my ideas and input to build upon his creative processes. I offered the idea of writing his ideas down "as our plan to help us". This suggestion didn't hinder his creativity but instead allowed a creative process to occur which directed his thinking. It gave him a sense that it was something he was going to work on over time but with a certainty that there was going to be an end product, something that is very important to Blake. Having a plan and a

Alana's story - Learning to be a co-learner - Challenging my teacher role

picture that he had drawn hung on the wall showed him and other children that we take their ideas seriously and are committed to working on such projects with them. With my understanding of Blake I knew that for him more than anything it was about having a Holden to drive around in! I wanted him though to persevere with this project and be proud of the time and effort he put into it. I identified with Blake that the timing had to be right- he wasn't interested if there was something else going on! I have noticed that Blake needed the right time, space and support and this remained constant in all his

Blake constructs a Spiderman Aeroplane!
9-13th March 2005

Today Blake approached me and said, "I want to make a Spiderman aeroplane". Earlier that day Bevan had suggested this idea to him. We set to work immediately, first writing a plan. As we were doing this Blake was looking around for ideas of materials he could use to make his aeroplane, he found a very large cylinder and decided that could be used for the body of the aeroplane. He had already decided that he was going to paint his aeroplane orange. As he was painting Izzy came over a watched him, he then found a small paper town cylinder and painted alongside Blake. When Dad arrived Blake eagerly ran and showed him his cylinder (aeroplane) hanging up to dry.



The next day first thing in the morning, he came over to me and said, "Are we going to start on my aeroplane?" I talked to Mum about his aeroplane and she informed me that he still plays with his Holden at home and had recently very proudly showed it to a family friend. In the art room we talked about different things we could use for wings, Blake said that they had to be big. We went outside and I had a look around out back for some materials. I found a very large plank of wood. Blake's eyes lit up when he saw it and



He tried to saw it flat on the ground....that didn't work....



This didn't work very well either...

projects. If too many children were around he would become frustrated/irritated, and we would just work on it later.

My documentation began to reflect a genuine and personal relationship as I recognized



This is getting tiring... and its too wobbly!!!



This is better! Nearly there...



Yah! You did it... now it's ready to paint!



Back inside in the art room Blake worked away painting the wings. He stood it upright and used his arms making large strokes up and down the wood. After morning tea he painted the other side. Before going home at 12 o'clock and while the wings were drying, he drew a picture of his aeroplane. We placed the propeller that we made in a safe place, ready for Monday.



and responded to Blake's learning. This was different from my previous stories where it was evident that I viewed my role as a teacher was to encourage, support and provide. Previously I had almost kept myself removed from the child and in so doing missed the opportunity to share the special moments that the visual arts offer and bring to those involved. These moments easily connect us with children allowing us see each child's uniqueness and help us to understand their thoughts and feelings.

It would appear that Blake valued the relationship we had developed as he

returned to me some weeks later with another idea. This time he wanted to make a Spiderman aeroplane. Amanda, his Mum, was excited about this project. Documentation of his red Holden had captured her interest. There had been talk about his project ideas at home as well as in the centre. As I began documenting this sequence of stories I made a conscious effort to include his parents' participation as well.

Blake's Spiderman Aeroplane

After the weekend everything was dry, Blake examined the pieces and moved the wings up and down on the body of the aeroplane. He hammered the wings into place. When he had finished he lifted it up, "Wow...it's so big", he announced. He then decided that he wanted to draw Spiderman on the plane.



The aeroplane was almost finished with only the propeller to go. Blake wasn't ready to do this straight away and wanted to go and play outside. In the afternoon he informed me that he would like to finish his Spiderman Aeroplane. After he hammered the propeller onto a piece of wood, we sat and thought of different ways to stick it on to the aeroplane. Blake suggested Sellotape, however he found this didn't work, he then remembered the hot glue gun, "Yeah...that will work" he exclaimed. Once it had heated up Blake carefully glued around the edges. We quickly stuck it on the aeroplane! Just to make sure it stuck, Blake added some Sellotape as well. Once that was done Blake stood up holding the plane with the biggest grin...Wow! The Spiderman Aeroplane was finished.



Blake's stories illustrate the way in which my documentation changed. I began including myself in the story in the first person, and writing it with Blake in mind as an important 'audience.' I was using words and phrases such as; "I said" "Together we", "we thought", and "I found..." As I started to write what I had noticed I initially became uncomfortable. The stories I wrote felt more than just me noticing what he had done (his learning); they were stories I wanted to meaningfully tell that could contribute to the project rather than ones that

would just provide evidence of Blake's learning. By placing myself as a central participant in the experience I felt a greater connection with and interest in Blake's projects. I was doing more than supporting and observing them. The following two examples illustrate the shift I have made, from a helpful observer, identifying learning and responding to it, to an active participant and contributor – a co-learner.



What a fantastic aeroplane Blake! You displayed so much perseverance and determination to complete your aeroplane to the desire you set out in your plan. What fun we had trying to come up with different solutions and ideas throughout the process. We are all so proud of you!

Blake we can see that when you have an idea in mind, you become very focused in creating it- you like to represent things which are of interest to you. I really enjoy working alongside you in your projects and we will continue to encourage your ideas and to work alongside you in these endeavours.



It is so great to hear that Blake is really enjoying his creations at home! Please feel welcome to include any photos or stories from home.

Alana's story - Learning to be a co-learner - Challenging my teacher role

From a learning and teaching story documented by Alana, 20.5.04

Recognizing: Emalee showed much curiosity and interest in what the other children were making and after standing back and observing, she demonstrated confidence and the ability to express a need by initiating to carry out the task of constructing an aeroplane herself.

Responding: Provide appropriate resources and materials to create more opportunities for Emalee to construct her ideas and interests. Continue to provide assistance (e.g. holding nails) and support her ideas. Extend her thinking by providing books with different forms of transportation. Discuss together the processes as she is involved in these tasks, Extend thinking and encourage conversation by asking questions which are of relevance and interest to Emalee as she is constructing.

From a learning and teaching story documented by Alana, 13.3.05

What a fantastic aeroplane Blake! You displayed so much perseverance and determination to complete your aeroplane to the desire you set out in your plan. What fun we had trying to come up with different solutions and ideas throughout the process. We are all so proud of you!

Blake I can see that when you have an idea in mind, you become very focused in creating it- you like to represent things which are of interest to you. I really enjoy working alongside you in your projects and will continue to encourage your ideas and work alongside you in these endeavours.

Documentation of Blake's projects also promoted conversation and support from Blake's parents. There was a feeling that everyone was excited about Blake's projects and it was important. With each completed project Amanda (his Mum) has told me how careful Blake is with them and keeps them in the spare room when he isn't using them or showing family and friends! I wonder if such care was taken because of the time and effort he put into each project. The photos from the Spiderman aeroplane tell a story in itself and I know Blake particularly enjoyed looking at these, as did other children when I displayed it in the art room.

My final story about Blake

Blake's Shark boat... May 2005
Written by Alana

After weeks of talk about the shark boat we finally got it started. A picture from a book prompted Blake and now we had something to work from. Blake found a box that was of similar shape in the collage bins. He also got a piece of cardboard and a yogurt container for its "nose". I thought it would be fun and effective if we tried paper mache for this project; Blake was keen for that idea.



He traced around the outside of the egg carton. And drew a tail off it. We cut the tail out and stuck it onto the body. Blake noticed from looking at the picture that we didn't need a fin on top and it only needed small fins off the side.



Next we prepared the paper mache, Blake had fun ripping the paper up and using his hands to mix it through the paste. Nicola came over as Blake was beginning to paper mache he very proudly told her all about the shark boat and showed her the picture in the book. Blake informed Nicola that she could help by holding the carton while he stuck the paper on. Nicola was happy to do this and they happily chatted to each other.



After morning tea they contin the project finishing it off. We about how it was getting really and forming shape from the lay paper. Blake put it up on the be dry on a piece of cardboard wrote his name all around it! He had to wait until it dried, so could paint it and add the fi touches

The following day I was in the Whanau room having lunch when Blake came with Dad holding the not quite completed Shark boat, he told me that he like to take it home to finish it. I thought that was a good idea and I knew it had taken so long to get it started he would be very keen to get it finished!

Several weeks went by and to my surprise (as I had almost forgotten!) came bursting through the door one morning holding a beautiful finished boat. He was so very proud and so was mum as I think the experience rekindled past feelings of paper mache! Many children throughout the room wanted to see and have a turn with the shark boat, Blake was very happy to share it around and talk about it to his friends.

Wow Blake what team work it was starting, making and finishing the long awaited shark boat! It is great that you had such an imaginative idea and persevered with it for so long and after 2 attempts already! You really took initiative in reminding me of this project. I really enjoyed talking lots about this shark boat and your enthusiasm for this idea that you had so clearly visualised and then found in a book.

Thanks Mum and Dad for your support and enthusiasm for this and all his projects.



If you have any photos of making or playing with

Blake's final story illustrates how continuity of learning occurred when centre and home both engaged in his Shark Boat project. Blake's idea and creativity was supported and extended through the encouragement and participation of his peers and family.

One word really stands out for me when I think of Blake's stories and that is perseverance! Visual art is a fantastic way for children to practice perseverance. Even the shark boat, which I had forgotten about, was being persevered on with help from mum at home, rather than sitting uncompleted. Blake's stories show that art is so much more than what I initially thought. Art provides a means for children to work together, communicate ideas, be curious, make connections, to challenge one's self, test and explore ideas, and the list goes on... Once I saw art as a way to incorporate other curriculum areas to make learning fun and to present on a table for an activity - but no longer!

Alana's story - Learning to be a co-learner - Challenging my teacher role

Alana's reflections: A summary of her own learning

Alana gave a presentation to the Centre of Innovation Hui on 29 November 2005. She presented the following summary of what she has learnt.

- About my identity as a teacher (participator, contributor and facilitator) and learner (player and dreamer)

Blake's stories have enabled me to feel comfortable in working with children and also offer more support than I once felt comfortable with. This does not mean that I would be exactly the same with the next child who wanted to make a Holden! Children are artists and just like artists, each is so different and individual. Whereas one artist may paint without an idea in mind, another would have planned it from the day, to the setting and the feeling. Neither is better than the other. As a teacher I have realized this and no longer restrict children to simply an 'experience' nor do I restrict them to participating in an art 'activity'. In fact I have found it is easier to provide neither, however trying to ensure children always have access to all materials and different mediums so *they can do either*.

I find by working *alongside* children you can discover their own methods and approaches and work *with them* in that way.

- That Blake is both as learner and teacher

Blake came to me with an idea, an idea he wanted to create. He knew what he wanted and I played the role as a facilitator to put his vision into a plan. Having a plan gave Blake direction and a foreseeable end product, this enabling him to initiate and make decisions towards the stages and completion of his projects. Blake's perseverance in these projects and desire to finish each project motivated me and encouraged my participation, especially the many times when I could have easily been too busy and procrastinated to the next day. It was these times where I became the learner - led and encouraged by Blake.

- That documentation contributed to continuity in Blake's learning through strengthening relationships

The documentation provided a way for the projects to connect to others. Blake was proud of his documentation and as he showed others the photos supporting his stories he was able to talk about the process with peers, other teachers and with his parents. His parents loved taking these stories home and were able to feel part of the experience, take interest and have

conversations, this bringing continuity to Blake's explorations and learning at home.

- That relationships are a foundation for learning within Visual Art

Blake was more than able to complete his projects independently, particularly since he had established plans and accessible materials. However Blake would not emerge to the next stage or work on these projects until we had time to work on them together. There was pleasure in this for both of us because in these times we would have fun experimenting, chatting and laughing together; we were building a strong relationship. I believe this was the reason for the time spent on each project; it was very unhurried and each stage or step to completion was done to a standard that pleased Blake rather than a quick job to get the end product. If it had been a hurried process to make something and I had never been approached with the idea or, importantly, followed the idea, we would not have had an opportunity to build a relationship and furthermore neither would Blake's Mum have been involved in the processes, through stories from Blake and myself and immediately with Blake to make his shark boat. Through these projects, Blake, Amanda and myself had opportunities to participate, contribute and facilitate - an individual project became a group project and gave life and meaning to a child's idea.

Doing the hard work - Concluding reflections

Community learning

Developing respectful and trusting relationships among parents, children and teachers is at the very heart of teacher practice in an early childhood learning community. Relationships are a catalyst for participation, learning occurs in the process of participation. Teachers have the responsibility for developing a culture of dialogue within the early childhood context in order to build relationships that value and acknowledge each person's expertise.

'Creating a culture of dialogue' in all communication practices involves putting aside prior assumptions and opening oneself to the possibilities and joy that engaging together can bring. It involves taking risks, as neither participant has control over where learning might go.

The view of parental participation as something visible in the centre 'shifted' to one that views all parents as active participants. More parents demonstrated attributes of participation. As relationships between teachers and parents moved into a *transforming* style, previous assumptions held by teachers about parental willingness and interest in their child were challenged. Through a mutual interest in the child, parental participation occurred in ways that were not always visible within the centre walls. Teacher communication practices became based on the knowledge that all parents are interested and willing to support their child, in their own way and time.

Children's learning experiences become richer and more meaningful through the participation of parents in the programme. As a result of strengthening relationships with parents, teachers increased their knowledge and understanding of both individual and groups of children, enabling them to make meaningful connections with the prior experiences and competence of the children in the programme.

Some cultural aspects of the centre changed as a result of the increase in parental participation. Taking children's profile books home became regular practice, as did written personal communication between parent and staff. A new expectation became evident – parents expected that information in the profile books would keep them informed, and invite participation and contribution.

An outcome of the development of dialogue in the centre was evidenced in the language used by community members. A parallel can be drawn between the way that the community began to share a common language about project work during communications with centre staff and the way that the teacher researcher team has extended its own common language repertoire. Words such as

‘BINGO’ and ‘dialogue’ became common usage as the researcher team developed shared meanings and understandings. Language as a cultural tool of this community reflects shared understandings about children’s learning.

Visual art is part of the language of the community. By this, the teachers mean that visual art provides children, parents and teachers a visual way to communicate with and understand each other. This communication may occur within the visual representation of a current group project, or a child’s individual piece of art. Visual art is a communication tool that links centre life with home life. Teachers regard creativity as the use of processes similar to those needed for acquiring knowledge; both involve active inquiry. Creativity using visual arts media produces a form of documentation of children’s imaginative thought and inquiry.

Researcher learning

We have found that, by using a variety of research tools, we are able to explore our own ideas and investigate our own theories. Thinking about research in terms of the following structures has helped us see research as being closely linked to our daily work as teachers.

Supporting literature

Emerging understandings of the research team were strengthened by literature that resonated with the team’s thinking. The literature at times ‘put words’ to the new thinking and in other situations acted as affirmation of the team’s understandings. For example, the literature on parent teacher partnerships listed elements of effective partnerships that correlated with what the research team were discovering. The literature about different types of relationships between educators and parents offered confidence to the communication framework that had been developed. Literature supported the research team’s confidence in the development of both pedagogical practices and research processes.

Research tools

Regular centre pedagogical documentation used as research data supported teachers to engage in reflective discussions based on what they actually do and what occurs in the centre as a result. This type of data threw into relief discrepancies in practice that could not be disputed, as the data researchers had generated was about their own practice.

The collection of quantitative data on types of contact with parents was initially viewed as ‘just a data recording method’; however, the research team acknowledged the value of this data during

analysis. Interpretation of the data into numbers provided teachers with the ‘bigger picture’ of parental participation, the ways they responded and what actually eventuated. A quantitative comparison of phase one and two provided confirmation of developments making a difference in the community, and motivated the team in continuing these practices.

Individual teachers’ BINGO story data was collated and represented to the team as collective data, thus extending the view held by individual teachers. Teachers learnt through reflecting on each other’s experiences as well as on their own. The shared understanding generated may not have arisen if left in the realm of individual reflection.

Findings

Our emerging ideas have surfaced as findings. These findings report on the theories or understandings that have become part of the culture of New Beginnings Preschool. Our theories evolve over time. As is described in the report, our understanding of BINGO stories evolved: currently both meanings continue to be used. The New Beginnings Preschool Framework initially emerged through the work undertaken by the infant and toddler teachers. The Framework offered a theory that other teachers related to and could apply to their everyday practice.