



Collaboration with Children and Families in Early Childhood Education

Garima Sachdev Kapoor

¹Education Consultant

¹Independant Researcher/Early Years Education Specialist
Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Abstract : This paper discusses the collaboration between early childhood education (ECE) and families plays a critical role in fostering mutual trust, respect, and appreciation. This partnership is grounded in guiding principles such as inclusion, respect, and empowerment, as outlined in frameworks like New Zealand's Early Years Education guidelines, Te Whāriki, which promote meaningful engagement with families. Collaborative relationships enable ECEs to provide individualized care and support to families, creating a holistic understanding of children's needs across home and school environments. By engaging families' unique strengths, educators can build family resilience and improve outcomes for children, particularly during periods of disruption. These partnerships also facilitate open communication, support early interventions, and foster a sense of security for children, who thrive on the trust shared between educators and their families. The paper considers principles of inclusion and mutual respect ensure that diverse family backgrounds, cultures, and abilities are valued, helping create consistent, nurturing environments that contribute to children's social competence and overall wellbeing. Through cooperative dialogue and shared decision-making, collaborative partnerships strengthen the connections between home and educational settings, supporting positive learning and developmental outcomes for children and families.

Collaboration between early childhood education (ece) and families plays a vital role in fostering mutual trust, respect and appreciation. Collaborative partnerships are underpinned by ece's guiding principles, environment and everyday practices, enabling ece and families to meaningfully and proactively engage, utilising families' unique strengths and facilitating family resilience by providing support during disruptions. For many children, the most significant adults in their daily lives are family members and teachers. Therefore, how these adults interact and collaborate, impact children's experiences and learning. Children need affirmations of meaningful connections between kaiko and whānau to develop holistically (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). Collaboration opens communication channels, enabling educators to provide individualised care to families and children, and families to engage proactively and meaningfully. The principles of Whānau Tangata (family and community) in Te Whāriki provides the framework for learning opportunities, wherein integral contributions of whānau are recognised (MoE, 2017) and Whakamana (empowerment) is facilitated by collaborative trustful relationships between families and ece, promoting positive outcomes for children and families.

Collaborative partnerships are significant in promoting children's wellbeing as they witness mutual trust between family and educators. Although Bowlby's attachment theory attributes secure attachments to the mother, correlations can be made to the theory wherein responsive adults provide children with a sense of security (Bowlby, 1951, as cited in Drewery & Claiborne, 2010/2012). Observing trust in collaborative partnerships between ece and family, children sense acceptance, encouragement and appreciation, thereby perceiving both family and practitioners as safe bases to explore, thus being able to develop strong attachments, communicate openly about issues, accept support from all adults, enabling positive outcomes of self-assurance and social competence.

Collaborative partnerships are effective for educators to create individualised approaches to children's needs, by getting a holistic picture of children at home and at ece, and customising responsiveness depending on needs and backgrounds. The cooperative atmosphere of collaborative relationships encourages families to share Funds of Knowledge (FoK) and special circumstances with ece (MoE, 2017), inspiring them to actively participate in decision-making regarding their children's education and developing appreciation of their children's uniqueness (Stonehouse, 2011). For instance, through collaborative partnerships, educators dealing with children's challenging behaviours or disabilities can provide support and educational services that meet needs, by drawing

upon families' strengths and experiences, positively impacting children's development and building family resilience by promoting confidence in parenting (Bradley & Kibera, 2006).

Within collaborative environments, a significant benefit is experienced when practitioners have concerns about children's health or development or want to celebrate strengths. Collaborative partnerships built over time, inspire faith. Sanders and Munford (2010) claim, through genuine and sustained relationships, practitioners collaborating with families and support services can facilitate early intervention or medical advice. Collaborative partnerships and support between educators and families enable understanding and empathy, identified concerns and strengths of children to be unreservedly shared, and appropriate, timely decisions to be made promoting children's wellbeing (Drewery & Claiborne, 2010/2012).

Collaborative relationships between families and ece, enable practitioners to ensure relevant support is in place between different ecological systems for children and families. Children's development is impacted by relationships with family, childcare experiences, and cultural values. Within the microsystem, children's participation and developmental potential are enhanced when there is a collaborative understanding of goals, and compatible crosslinks between ece and homes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, collaboration results in affirming the importance of interdependent relationships, promoting self-assurance and supporting wellbeing of children and families.

Collaborative partnerships are significant for families to trust opinions and expertise of practitioners in having an intimate knowledge of their and their children's needs (Duncan, 2006). Sustained relationships between eces and multi-disciplinary agencies have the effect of positively impacting outcomes for families and children relying on ece to identify and liaise support for their children (Clarkin-Phillips, 2012). The effect of collaborative partnerships in building trust to avail multi-agency support for positive outcomes is significant.

Cooperative interactions and cohesiveness between ece and families enable parents to get information about children from ece's qualified experts and understand the importance of their role in children's education and well-being, thereby building on family strengths and creating environments conducive to development (Gunn, Child, Madden, Purdue, Surtees, Thurlow & Todd, 2004). The effect of collaborative relationships between families and educators means parents have shared knowledge of children's personal-social-emotional, communication and physical developmental milestones, and growth can be nurtured. This information sharing in collaborative partnerships engages parents, and as an outcome makes them feel appreciated and respected by educators, further strengthening relationships.

Collaborative partnerships have traits of mutual respect, sensitivity and recognition of unique strengths (Stonehouse, 2011). Culture is a vital aspect influencing behaviour and actions. Sensitivity to diverse perspectives, as a characteristic of collaborative partnerships, is effective in giving children a sense of belonging, contributing to wellbeing and confidence. In collaborative partnerships, educators make efforts to understand children's background and culture, recognising and appreciating differences. Collaborative relationships acknowledge and appreciate diversity in culture and socioeconomic status enabling all parents to feel valued and their contributions welcomed, building on abilities of families to demonstrate enthusiasm in their children's education, share FoK, promoting learning outcomes. This facilitates educators in creating culturally compatible curriculum links, promoting consistency between home and ece, optimising children's learning and development (O'Brien & Salonen, 2011).

Amatea, Smith-Adcock and Villares (2006), claim that collaborative partnerships are significant in building resilience in families and children, promoting learning outcomes by providing support to families during disruptions. The positive impact of collaborative partnerships from a family resilience perspective allows teachers to shift from blaming children's development gaps or disinterest, on family circumstances, such as divorced parents' interaction with children (Walsh, 2008). Educators building trusting relationships are non-judgemental about family situations and instead examine family strengths, collaboratively creating new possibilities, solutions and building resilience. The effect is that educators support families in recognising their strengths, encouraging a hopeful outlook, and a sense of self-efficacy (Amatea et al., 2006), all of which contribute to positive outcomes of the wellbeing of families and children.

While critically examining the significance of collaborative relationships between ece and families, it is imperative to recognise that partnership is a combination of commitment and engagement between practitioners and families (Zhang, 2015). "Just about all families want the best for their children." (Amatea et al., 2006, p.187). However diverse families deal with challenging circumstances (e.g. financial difficulties, separation/divorce, health issues, language/cultural difference) that may impact their ability to remain responsive and engaged. Therefore, being empathetic, consistently and committedly accepting, flexible, open-minded to ideas and new cultural learnings, listening to parents and framing conversations around strengths before dealing with areas of concern, can help establish collaborative partnerships (Hansen 2016), promoting wellbeing.

In the Code of Ethics for Certified Teachers (Education Council, 2015), are embedded pre-requisites that can form the basis of principles for building resilience and supporting positive outcomes for children and families. These include inclusion and mutual respect.

The principle of inclusion is essential when building collaborative partnerships, resulting in positive outcomes for children. Department for Education [DfE] (2017) states, children must be given equitable opportunities to develop according to their needs, allowing all children regardless of ability, behavioural problems or background to benefit from ece programmes that incorporate an unbiased, inclusive approach. Anticipating that engagement with parents of differently-abled children can be challenging because

parents may feel hesitant, collaborative relationships reflecting Te Whāriki strands of Mana Atua (Well-being) and Mana Whenua (Belonging), propound a culture of sensitively promoting capabilities of all children and utilising experiences of whānau (MoE, 2017).

In collaborative environments where inclusion is practised, children witness adults role-modelling empathy, imbibing respect and interdependence (DfE, 2017). Collaborative relationships between practitioners and family entail that whānau's strengths as experts on differentiated children are appreciated, their aspirations for children with differentiated needs are recognised, and they are integrated into decisions regarding children's development (MoE, 2017). Having role-models who exhibit cooperation and acceptance, all children, irrespective of diverse needs and abilities, experience positive outcomes of meaningful relationships, and through integrated inclusive programs, imbibe tolerance, empathy and gain social confidence.

Boylan and Dalrymple (2009) state "participatory practice is often associated with key values such as leadership, trust and respect, equality between professionals and service users and mutuality" (p. 61). The equitability desired for children requires families and ece to have trusting, cohesive relationships which need individualised approaches, background knowledge, skills and competence, which families have experience in, and can share with practitioners (Bradley & Kibera, 2006). Sharing this knowledge entails engagement which results from supportive partnerships, mediation resulting from families' experiences, collective brainstorming, dialogue, sharing advice and tips, which support reflection and analysis of existing practice. Collaborative partnerships encourage building resilience and support positive outcomes for children and families by recognising strategies used, challenges faced and strengths of families in developing children with differentiated needs. Pantić and Florian (2015), promulgate that parents inspire new knowledge, insights and responses, which in collaboration with ece can stimulate teachers to find new perspectives and approaches for creating flexible, equipped and inclusive environments, irrespective of children's abilities or needs.

The principle of inclusion applies to diversity in families, not only in children. With inclusion, judgemental stereotypes associated with parents' socioeconomic status, culture, family structure, internal familial roles and responsibilities can be avoided by developing an "appreciative lens" (Drewery & Claiborne, 2010/2012, p.36). Inclusive eces are nurturing, open-minded and responsible, harbouring collaboration between diverse families and ece children. This enables informed decisions and dialogue, rather than falling prey to preconceived notions based upon deficits or beliefs favouring some family structures over others (Sanders & Munford, 2010). With the principle of inclusion, diverse families develop confidence to collaboratively share experiences, build support structures for themselves and other families, practitioners and children, and everyone can benefit from appreciative idea-sharing.

The principle of inclusion is not only limited to disability but as Gunn et al. (2004) state, sexuality, ethnicity, culture and gender are other factors which can impend collaborative partnerships. Discussing sexuality may be uncomfortable for eces and parents, and gay-parent families can get marginalised, impacting their engagement. The first example of the principle of inclusion I am using is for teachers to include same-sex weddings during children's role-play and remain open and non-judgemental if they observe boys playing in the dress-up corner as Gunn et al. (2004), suggest in their discourse. It becomes an important responsibility of eces to collaborate with parents for designing policies and devising resources to acknowledge homosexuality, challenge heteronormative assumptions and discrimination, role-modelling this for positive outcomes of well-being resulting from acceptance and a sense of belonging, for all children and families.

In the second example of inclusion, families with diverse backgrounds and experiences, or with differently-abled children can be invited to co-teach, proactively engaging, supporting new understandings and strategies that serve inclusion (Hansen, 2016). This can foster collaboration, develop teaching practice, utilising whānau experience, strengths and FoK (MoE, 2017) for differently-abled children. Co-teaching with practitioners entails that parents collaboratively work with the regular teacher in ece, using real-life experiential strategies, instead of just supporting externally. Such collaboration based on the principle of inclusive, on strategies derived from experience and focused on beliefs, values and trust can have a significant impact on the development of inclusive learning environments, promoting positive outcomes for all children and families.

The second principle for facilitating positive outcomes for children and families is mutual respect in collaborative partnerships. Mutual respect is based on the premise that diversity in values, culture, abilities, family structures (single-parent, same-sex parents, blended, inter-racial families etc.), are appreciated and strengths in each difference are recognised. Collaborative partnerships based on mutual respect ensure teachers regard families' insights about children, and families value and respect teachers' knowledge in understanding children's educational and care needs.

Practitioners must view families from a respectful, strength-based perspective, without making presumptions about functioning of families, structure or background (Walsh, 2008). Partnerships in ece with mutual respect as a guiding principle, enable communicating needs and values, finding common ground, sharing understanding for working together to achieve shared goals. By promoting ece environments of respect, acceptance can be fostered, enabling collaborative, trusting partnerships so that families struggling with disruptions feel connected and supported, their strengths recognised, facilitating meaningful relationships to "infuse a family resilience approach." (Amatea et al., 2006, p.187).

The principle of mutual respect submits that children are on individual journeys and families have diverse aspirations for children. Collaboration is based on the principle that ece and families work respectfully together to realise the hopes of families. According to Te Whariki, children have increased confidence when their family backgrounds are respected, resulting in building

positive self-identities (MoE, 2017). Respect creates a sense of belonging making children feel valued and their families appreciated, positively impacting children's and families' wellbeing. When practitioners and families are respectful collaborators, benefits are reaped by all stakeholders. Families are empowered to actively engage in meaningful ways. Teachers feel supported, with the understanding of partners working towards common goals at ece and home. Children develop self-assuredly in mutually respected home and ece environments.

The first example of the principle of mutual respect for facilitating resilience and supporting positive outcomes for children and families is taken from Mitchell, Bateman, Ouko, Gerrity, Lees, Matata, and Xiao, (2015). Herein, practitioners planned engagement with groups of culturally diverse parents to discuss values. This process became wider than a tokenistic practice of asking parents about their child during enrolment. The open, clear, continual communication, specifically about values enabled mutual respect to develop by facilitating understanding of values that can become areas of concern, like differing expectations about readiness for school, and literacy and numeracy competence in children, also discussed by Patel and Agbeyega (2013). Teachers examined ways to integrate their values with diverse families' values. By demonstrating how learning happens through play in relation to these areas, teachers alleviated concerns with respect and transparency. Guo (2012) states, building understanding requires "opening identities, converging differences and exploring ways of being and doing that lie beyond our current state (p.8)." Mutual respect being a cornerstone principle enables ece to reflect, reevaluate views about families' beliefs, and remain enthusiastic about making curriculum delivery adaptations so that social, intellectual, cultural, and spiritual learning propagated by MoE (2017) can be meaningfully interwoven with shared values of families and ece.

The second example for promoting mutual respect is being shared from my experience, by enabling cultural understanding, through a 'Share Your Culture' programme for diverse children. Mutual respect can be hindered with cultural distance between teachers and families (Chan & Ritchie, 2016). The principle of respect helped overcome this challenge by creating opportunities for exposure and dialogue between ece and families. In this initiative, parents felt empowered, being given confidence to participate on their terms and time availability. Not all families were comfortable in relaying the uniqueness of their culture in a prescribed manner, so the mode of sharing was left open to parents. In the interest of building sustained, collaborative partnerships, practitioners were flexible. Families told ece that they felt respected, accomplished, satisfied, which can be correlated to Zhang's (2015) claim about meaningful engagement being gratifying. Moreover, teachers also engaged in this mutuality, sharing their own cultural aspects. With parental collaboration, practitioners built a corner in the role-play area which included multicultural dress-up clothes, ethnic food-sharing opportunities, and became intentional about incorporating multicultural folklore, songs and story-reading in native languages into the curriculum and everyday practice. With this consistent, ongoing, sustained practice, tokenism was avoided, and mutual appreciation, understanding and respect were enabled.

In conclusion, the importance of collaborative partnerships between ece and families promotes trust and facilitates transparent, non-judgemental relationships, allowing participation in decision-making and enables consistency between home and ece for positive outcomes for children and families. Collaboration facilitates families and ece to exchange knowledge, strengthens understanding and responsiveness to individualised needs. Collaborative partnerships are founded on principles of inclusion and mutual respect. An ece built on inclusive practice enables children and families to be appreciated without prejudice or discrimination due to abilities or diversity. Mutual respect between families and ece fosters belongingness, acceptance and appreciation, thus positively impacting children's and families' wellbeing and self-assuredness. Collaborative partnerships between ece and families based on respect and inclusion ensure understanding, greater consistency between home and ece and support families by reinforcing and utilising their strengths and promoting resilience.

REFERENCES

- [1] Amatea, E. S., Smith-Adcock, S., & Villares, E. (2006). From family deficit to family strength: Viewing families' contributions to children's learning from a family resilience perspective. *Professional School Counselling*, 9(3), 177-189.
- [2] Boylan, J., & Dalrymple, J. (2009). *Understanding advocacy for children and young people* (pp. 60-76). New York, NY: Open University Press.
- [3] Bradley, J., & Kibera, P. (2006). Closing the gap: Culture and the promotion of inclusion in child care. *YC Young Children*, 61(1), 34.
- [4] Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development*
- [5] Chan, A., and Ritchie, J. (2016). Parents, participation, partnership: Problematising New Zealand early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 17(3), 289-303.
- [6] Clarkin-Phillips, J. (2012). Connecting curriculum and policy to assist families' aspirations. *Waikato Journal of Education*. 17(1), 17-27. Retrieved from: <http://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10289/7147/Clarkin-Phillips%20Connecting%20curriculum%202012.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- [7] Department for Education. (2017). *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>
- [8] Drewery, W., & Claiborne, L. B. (2010/2012). *Human development: Family, place, culture* (pp. 28-64). Sydney, Australia: McGraw-Hill Education.
- [9] Duncan, J. (2006). Collaboration between New Zealand early childhood centres and community resources. *Childrenz Issues*, 10(2), 14-19.
- [10] Duncan, J., Te One, S., Drewe, R., Te Punga-Jurgens, J., Shaw, L., Eaton, S., Thomas, M., & the Whanganui Central Baptist Kindergartens and Early Learning Centres' Teaching and Parent Facilitator Teams. (2012). *Active adult participation in early*

- childhood education: Enhancing child learning and community childhood education: Enhancing child learning and community wellness: A summary. *Teaching learning research initiative*. Retrieved from: http://www.tlri.org.nz/sites/default/files/projects/9279_summaryreport.pdf
- [11] Education Council New Zealand/Matatū Aotearoa. (2015). *Code of Ethics for Certified Teachers*. Retrieved from: <https://teachingcouncil.nz/sites/default/files/coe-poster-english.pdf>
- [12] Gunn, A. C., Child, C., Madden, B., Purdue, K., Surtees, N., Thurlow, B., & Todd, P. (2004). Building inclusive communities in early childhood education: Diverse perspectives from Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 5(3), 293-308.
- [13] Guo, K. (2012). Chinese immigrants in New Zealand early childhood settings: Perspectives and experiences. *Early Childhood Folio*, 16(1), 5-9
- [14] Hansen, J. H. (2016). Social Imaginaries and Inclusion. In M. A. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Educational philosophy and theory* (pp. 1–6). Singapore: Springer.
- [15] Ministry of Education (2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington: Ministry of Education. Retrieved from: <https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-documents/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum>
- [16] Mitchell, L., Bateman, A., Ouko, A., Gerrity, R., Lees, J., Matata, K., & Xiao, W. (2015). *Teaching and learning in culturally diverse early childhood settings*. Hamilton, New Zealand: Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research, University of Waikato.
- [17] O'Brien, M., & Salonen, T. (2011). Child poverty and child rights meet active citizenship: A New Zealand and Sweden case study. *Childhood*, 18(2), 211-226.
- [18] Pantić, N., & Florian, L. (2015). Developing teachers as agents of inclusion and social justice. *Education Inquiry*, 6(3), 273-311.
- [19] Patel, S., & Agbenyega, J. (2013). How we view Australian early childhood education practice: Indian migrant parents' perspectives. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 38(1), 49-54.
- [20] Sanders, J., & Munford, R. (2010). *Working with families: Strengths based approaches*. Dunmore.
- [21] Stonehouse, A. (2011). Moving from family participation to partnerships: Not always easy; always worth the effort. *Exchange-Early Childhood Leaders*, 33(2), 48.
- [22] Walsh, F. (2008). Using theory to support a family resilience framework in practice. *Social Work Now*, 5-14.
- [23] Zhang, Q. (2015). Defining 'meaningfulness': enabling pre-schoolers to get the most out of parental involvement. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 40(4), 112–120.

