Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Early Childhood Pedagogies

Article summary:

Co-constructed engagement with Australian Aboriginal families in early childhood education

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Introduction

Australia is a signatory to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), which upholds the rights of Indigenous Peoples to participate in educational decisions. However, although Australian policy requires educators to form meaningful partnerships with Aboriginal families, 'little has been done to support non-Aboriginal teachers to engage authentically with Aboriginal families' (p. 2). Neo-colonising forms of family engagement and partnership undermine Aboriginal families, perpetuate deficit views of diverse children and families, and create barriers to authentic democratic partnerships . For Aboriginal families, who have resisted generations of institutional racism, ongoing neo-colonising approaches to partnership reinforce their mistrust of an educational system that has harmed their communities (p. 2). This article describes how preschool teachers and leaders who participated in a cycle of action research focused on culturally responsive pedagogy were supported to question taken-for-granted neo-colonising practices for engaging with Aboriginal families (pp. 2-3) and to develop more equitable family/educator/leader relationships.

Context and research method

The research described in this article derives from a larger project, *Culturally Responsive Pedagogies in Reggio Emilia Inspired Early Learning Settings* (Rigney et al., 2020). While the teachers and leaders participating in the project were familiar with the Reggio Emilia educational principles, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) was new to them. CRP is a hopeful approach to decolonising educational settings (p. 3). 'A key principle of CRP is engagement with children's lifeworlds – their cultures, languages, experiences – and, in the context of early childhood education, their families' (pp. 3-4). The researchers worked closely with teachers and leaders from six early learning sites across metropolitan and regional South Australia. A

professional learning community was established, bringing together the researchers, teachers and leaders to engage with relevant concepts and literature that supported the teachers and leaders to (1) critically reflect on taken-for-granted practices, and (2) re-design their pedagogy and/or practice through the lens of CRP (p. 6). The project involved a one-year action research cycle consisting of four stages:

- *Provocation:* critically reflecting on a pedagogical challenge chosen by each site (Term 1).
- *Re-design:* drawing from CRP and Reggio Emilia education principles to re-design pedagogy and/or practice (Term 2).
- *Action and research:* trialling the redesigned pedagogy/practice and collecting research data (Term 3).
- *Reflection:* critically reflecting on the outcomes (Term 4).

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with participants at start of the research and at the end of the action research cycle. The interview transcripts were analysed in order to identify common themes within and across sites.

Findings

At the beginning of the project, leaders and teachers expressed confidence in their relationships with families, and particularly in their site's ability to listen to families (p. 8). The family engagement practices described by the leaders suggested a transformational leadership approach ('they all come on board') and the use of expedient administrative methods, such as interviews and surveys, to gather information about children and their families (p. 8). These methods reinforced power relationships that position teachers and leaders in authority to make decisions about family engagement (how, when, where and why), which – they believed – built comfortable, effective relationships with families (p. 8). 'Nevertheless, leaders acknowledged that their conventional methods for engaging with families were ineffective for some Aboriginal families' (p. 8). In these circumstances, Aboriginal Community Engagement Officers (ACEOs) liaised with so-called 'hard to reach' Aboriginal families – in effect, positioning ACEOs in the role of neo-colonising 'police' (p. 9). This taken-for-granted practice, and others such as surveys, questionnaires and parent-teacher interviews, 'meant that Western views of family engagement continued to be normalised', with the assumption that Aboriginal families did not want to engage (p. 9). 'Meanwhile, some teachers never actually engaged with these families' (p. 9).

Final interviews indicate that teachers and leaders drew on the readings and PLC discussions to critically reflect on their roles as learners and listeners in relation to families' funds of knowledge (p. 9), enabling them to re-design their practice in culturally responsive ways. This simultaneously and unexpectedly (to them) strengthened their engagement with families (p. 10). During the project, the roles of teachers and leaders changed from reflecting a transformational vision of 'bringing families on board' towards co-constructed engagement with Aboriginal families. The researchers argue that co-construction is an important first step towards decolonising family engagement (p. 11).

Rather than replicating transformational leadership practices that are 'ubiquitous in the schooling sector' (p. 5), researchers call for 'specific early childhood leadership approaches that better align with the field's values of relationships, collaboration, family engagement and diversity' (p. 5). The researchers conclude that, 'As the preschool teams in this study were only beginning to re-imagine their engagement with families in co-constructed decolonising ways, further scholarship is needed to explore the perspectives of families and to consider how such approaches can be sustained and strengthened over the long term '(p. 11).

Key take-aways for educational practice

- Bringing CRP into dialogue with the educational principles of Reggio Emilia was significant in supporting teachers' and leaders' capacity to critically reflect on taken-for-granted practices.
- Deep listening, dialogue and agency are needed shift transformational leadership toward a co-constructed approach that focuses on democratic practices, social justice, and equity.
- Decolonising approaches awaken teachers' critical consciousness to question taken-for-granted practices which continue neo-colonising approaches to family engagement and create power inequities.
- Positioning teachers and leaders as learners offers opportunities to ask questions, learn about family culture, and build knowledge together with children, families and communities, working collectively for a shared vision.

Further reading

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