The initiating parent voice

Placing the child at the heart of the dialogue about learning

Marjolein Whyte

Assessment practice suggested in *Te Whāriki*, Aotearoa New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum, aspires to involve parents in the planning for their child’s learning (Ministry of Education, 1996). The narrative documentation of children’s learning, known as learning stories, is an example of such assessment. While the New Zealand Early Childhood Regulations (Ministry of Education, 2008) advise that parents are to be part of the decision-making process for their child’s learning, Stuart, Atiken, Gould, and Meade (2008) found that parents’ comments in response to learning stories are more likely to be of a summative nature, rather than contributing feedback that feeds into planning for learning. In 2010, a concept called the *initiating parent voice* was developed during a small research project. This research shows that parent involvement in their child’s learning is enhanced by asking the parent to talk about a teacher-identified learning interest with their child, and share this with the teacher, before the full learning story is documented by the teacher (Whyte, 2010). Further research, recently completed for a Master of Education thesis, was carried out in the context of parents in full-time employment with their children in five full-time childcare settings. The use of the concept of the initiating parent voice shows an increase in parent efficacy and opportunities for dialogue with teachers. The question remains as to whether teachers will embrace this opportunity for dialogue.

The child voice and the parent voice in the teaching and learning process

Assessment for learning in early childhood education is about active involvement by all concerned. It positions the child at the forefront of the teaching–learning process, the parent as the child’s first teacher, and the teacher as an active respondent to both the child and the parent, encouraging both the child and the parent to take part in the teaching–learning process (Carr, Cowie, & Davis, 2015; Carr & Lee, 2012; Ministry of Education, 1996; 2008). Black and William (1998), who coined the term “assessment for learning”, saw assessment as a collaborative process which was focused on future learning and engaged with the child in “feed-forward”. Documentation of assessment in early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand takes the shape of “learning narratives” that arise from the interests of the child, noticed by the teachers and seen in the sociocultural context of the centre, family, and community. Teachers notice learning taking place during the course of the child’s play and then recognise and respond to the child’s voice, with the child’s, parents’, whānau and teachers’ voices all informing the narrative and, subsequently, the learning–teaching process (Carr et al., 2015; Cowie & Bell, 1999; Ministry of Education, 1996; 2004). Hatherly and Richardson (2007) identified that including a child and a parent voice can be challenging for teachers, because of time constraints, language barriers, and having limited knowledge of the home context from which the learning interest comes. However, the Ministry of Education (2011) is calling for a higher level of involvement and
greater parent responsibility for the education of their children. The literature shows that the inclusion of the child voice and the parent voice in assessments is essential to the teaching–learning process. The combined voices not only empower the child in his or her learning but also foster connections with the home environment, which creates a sense of belonging for the child and an “identity of participation” for the families (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2004; Wenger, 1998). With the child’s, the parents’ and the teachers’ perspectives shared, a more informed understanding of the child’s learning is established (Carr et al., 2015).

The initiating parent voice: A model for involvement of children and their parents in assessment and planning

The “initiating parent voice” (Whyte 2010) is a way of engaging the child and the parent in planning and learning before teachers have documented their interpretation (“recognising”) of what they have noticed. The use of the initiating parent voice is different from current assessment practice of asking for a parent voice after the detailed learning story has been written. The timing of the initiating parent voice before the learning story is written is important, as this opens up a dialogue about the child’s learning that can engender a collaborative exploration of the potential for meaningful learning experiences. A recent photo of the child’s interest selected by the teacher and/or the child functions as a prompt for the child to talk to the parent about their learning experience, which is documented by the parent together with connections to home experiences the parent recognises. The initiating parent voice is well aligned to Te Whariki’s notion of the child taking the lead in their learning (Ministry of Education, 1996). The initiating parent voice, with one or more photos and no teacher interpretation yet, encourages the parent to listen to the child’s voice and record connections with learning at home or ideas about what could happen next.

The following invitation to the parent explains the concept of the initiating parent voice:

This is a photo of ………………..’s interest we have observed. Please ask your child to tell you about this photo. Please write down their words and non-verbal response first. Does your child have any questions? What do they like to do or find out about next? Is there any connection to what your child is doing or experiencing at home, family, etc.? We would love you to share your ideas from your discussions about the learning interest.

The teacher encourages the parent to talk with their child about the photo and write down the child’s words as well as their own response. This creates opportunities for dialogue between the child, parent, and teachers, especially the immediate opportunity for conversation upon the return of the form and the ongoing conversations with the parent once a learning story is written as a response to the initiating parent voice. The timing of the learning story (after the initiating parent voice form has been returned) potentially gives both child and parent voices a prominent place in the learning journey (Whyte, 2010a). This involves engaging in continuous critical inquiry and ensuring interactions have meaning, value, and purpose (Duncan, Te One, Dewe, & Te Punga-Jurgens, 2012).

Current research project: Exploring “initiating parent voice” with parents in full-time employment

Recent qualitative research undertaken as a partial requirement for my Master of Education study through the University of Auckland investigated parents’ perspectives on and involvement in their child’s learning. It used the concept of the initiating parent voice as a way for the parent to communicate with their child about the child’s learning interest before teachers documented the learning. Fifteen participants were involved in the research over the period of June 2014 to February 2015. During this period, the children, aged from 2 to 5 years, were attending five different long-day education and care centres in the Auckland area. The research used a multiple-case study method, with pre- and post-research interviews conducted at the beginning and at the end of the research period with each of the parent participants. The interviews formed the main data in the research (Yin, 2009). Additional data included the initiating parent voice forms (once to twice per month for each child), learning stories written by the teachers for the participating children, and research notes. At the time of writing this article, the findings have been documented using open and axial coding and patterns arising from the research findings have been identified. The findings have been further narrowed down and grouped under themes for the discussion, which will draw on an interpretivist approach and poststructural theory (Canella, 1997; Foucault, 1972,1979; Freire, 1972).

Research findings: Changes in parent perspectives and involvement in the child’s learning

Most parents (10 out of 15) said that the quality of the communication with their child about their day in the centre increased significantly upon engaging with the initiating parent voice concept. Eleven of the fifteen parents especially enjoyed the way in which it became a focus for interaction with their child and how this interaction was experienced as “quality time” together, and “being in the moment” with their child. One parent said:

It is different from the ‘bath-time chat’. It gave us bonding time: that 10 minutes was just really good to have him sit down and just focus on this one-on-one relationship and I really learned how much he is thinking.

Listening to the “child voice” occasioned positive changes to the parents’ perspectives on learning. From seeing their child largely in terms of their individual attributes (e.g., “social”, “shy”) parents made a shift to discovering the value of revisiting learning (mentioned by 13 parents) and learning more about the child’s specific interests (see examples below). It is interesting to note that only six parents included links between centre and home experiences on the initiating parent voice form. Twelve parents wanted more opportunities to talk with the teacher about their child; however eight parents thought teachers were too busy:

You don’t want to, umm… teachers are… generally busy when you come and you don’t want to have to take up their time when they have got other things to do…

Another parent said:

We (parents with a full-time job) are just … ships in the night sort of thing … just passing them by.

The following section will present examples from the research and a brief discussion of the forms filled out by the parents in collaboration with their child. The parent consent included the use of this information, including photos, for articles and presentations. The names of the
As the focus from reminiscing and “wondering” about the event to the questioning itself, which can diminish imagination and the ability to create a story (Egan, Cant, & Judson, 2014). Fivush et al. (2006) add that when parents tell the child what happened (in a learning story or life event), children find it more difficult to tell stories about their personal past themselves. In the literature it is considered to be important to let the child take the lead. Carr and Lee (2012) point out that the narrative becomes more meaningful if the exact words of the child are noted down, as in the example above, which gives the child a sense of agency and develops his/her identity as a learner. The next example (Example 2) shows a mother thinking about her involvement in child Nico’s learning as the research progresses.

Examples of the initiating parent voice concept from the current research project

The initiating parent voice form consists of a photo of the child at play and/or focused on an interest. It also includes a short invitation for parents to respond, as mentioned earlier in the article. Parent participants indicated that the photo needs to be recent and meaningful to the child. The initiating parent voice concept puts the child at the forefront of the child–parent narrative using a photo that has come from the child’s care setting. The parent engages in co-constructing the narrative response with the child (Whyte & Hunt, 2015). Fivush, Haden, and Reese (2006) add that reminiscing on past events is essential in understanding present and future events. This is made clear in the following example (Example 1) which shows how the initiating parent voice concept creates an opportunity for 3-year-old Lisa and her mother to use their own language and share some special experiences and “funds of knowledge” from home (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

**Initiating parent voice: Example 1**

Fivush & Hayden indicate that “The increasing use of more open-ended elaborative questions with age helps children become more active participants in reminiscing” (1997, p. 1578). Asking too many questions however, might shift the focus from reminiscing and “wondering” about the event to the questioning itself, which can diminish imagination and the ability to create a story (Egan, Cant, & Judson, 2014). Fivush et al. (2006) add that when parents tell the child what happened (in a learning story or life event), children find it more difficult to tell stories about their personal past themselves. In the literature it is considered to be important to let the child take the lead. Carr and Lee (2012) point out that the narrative becomes more meaningful if the exact words of the child are noted down, as in the example above, which gives the child a sense of agency and develops his/her identity as a learner. The next example (Example 2) shows a mother thinking about her involvement in child Nico’s learning as the research progresses.

---

**Figure 1. English translation**

I pointed to this photo and asked Lisa: “Baby, what were you playing?”

“I was cooking.”

“Who were you cooking together with?”

“John.”

“Oh, cooking together with John!”

“Yes, because John was the dad, and I was the mum.”

“So, what did you cook?”

“Fish, chicken, vegetables, beans, tofu and lots of fruit.”

“Wow … you were very good, Lisa, you could cook so many dishes.”

I touched her head and gave her a kiss. Upon receiving the compliment, she was very excited, and held on to my hand and said, “Mum, I want to be like you in future and cook lots of yummy dishes.” I looked at her cute and smiley face and thought, “No wonder, every time when I cook dinner, she is always around me to see if she could help me to get the dishes or the bowls, and she often said ‘It smells good, smells good mum, how do you cook it? It smells good!’”

---

**Figure 1. Initiating Parent Voice**
Initiating parent voice: Example 2

In Nico's first experience of the parent using the initiating parent voice concept, the parent asks explicit questions, producing specific answers, rather than focusing on the imaginative play Nico had engaged in at the centre. Nico's mother writes: “He said he is colouring; there were three colours on the paper: orange, blue and dark green.” After receiving the parent response to this first episode, a teacher at the centre shared her feelings about the “limited” information Nico shared with his mum. The painting was not really about colours, the teacher said; instead it represented a very imaginative story. The teacher documented the story that evolved during the painting:

“It’s a banana, an orange banana”, says Nico.

“Mine is a volcano”, says Enco.

“It’s a rocket ship now and it’s going in the volcano” says Nico.

“It’s gone into a green banana”, says Nico.

“My volcano ate it and melted it in the lava”, says Enco.

“So hot that all my colours have gone”, says Nico.

This created a dilemma for the teacher as from her point of view sharing this imaginative story as part of the teacher’s learning story would possibly discourage Nico’s mum from further participation and have a negative effect on the teacher’s relationship with Nico’s mum. It is the researcher’s view that ongoing dialogue and feedback could help and motivate the parent to persevere with the initiating parent voice concept and try out different ways to enter the conversation, for example by using “I wonder”, or an open-ended question (Egan et al., 2014).

Dialogue about the teaching–learning process could start a cycle of collaborative learning and sharing between the centre and the home environment, where conversations between the teacher, child, and the parent are seen in an “additive” light, adding to the learning (Sellers, 2013; Whyte & Hunt, 2015; Whyte & Naughton, 2014).

The second response shows the parent’s engagement building on the first experience: Recently he shows a lot of interest in reading. He likes to read all sorts of books. I think I will take this opportunity to introduce some different story to him. Hope he can learn more words through the story.

Here the mother reflects her aspirations for her son’s learning as she starts to think about what she can do to help her son in his reading. This is an opportune chance for the teacher to talk about the reading that is happening for the child at the centre (Whyte, 2010b). There is also potential for using the information shared by the parent in further planning.

The parent’s third response emphasises this aspect of possible teacher–parent engagement even more:

Nico said: “I watch the videos with Enco. I asked Enco to share with me. We laughed ourselves a lot. Even Enco got a bit crazy at the end. He starts shake his head.” He copied Enco’s act to me with a crazy laugh. I asked Nico “Are you pretend to be silly?” He said: “No it’s funny”. I think every child likes electronic product e.g.: iPad, phone, tv…. but I found they not only like cartoons and games; they more like to see some videos or photos reflect to themselves. At home Nico likes to see my photo album. He usually asks me a lot of questions about some old photos; it seems to bring up a lot of memories of himself.

Initiating parent voice: Example 3

Another parent participant noticed the “massive smile” on her child’s face while talking about the dancing she had engaged in at the centre together with her friends. Three and a half year old Nicky pointed out all her friends in the photos and the different actions in the dance from the first photo to the next. Recalling the sequence of the dance activity is a significant learning experience in itself. Nicky’s mother responds by describing the connection to home, indicating that her child is singing and dancing “all the time” and sharing the name of her child’s favourite dance movie. Nicky’s mother also wrote: “While she (her child) was explaining the pictures she would start singing”.

In the initial interview, at the start of the research, Nicky’s mother shared that whenever her child was learning or doing something new she would sing her response. Further dialogue between the child, parent, and teachers would consolidate this child’s learning strategy and identity as a learner.

Involving the child and the parent in dialogue about the learning

What is made apparent in all three examples from the research findings is that, while there is “reification and participation” by the parent and the child through their responses, the findings show that parent participation is one-sided when it does not feed through into the planning for learning at the centre. An initial concern that arises from the research is the seeming lack of opportunities for parents to be involved in their child’s learning at the centre while their child is attending a long-day education and care centre. Dialogue is essential for acting on ideas in order to further develop understandings (Carr & Lee, 2012; Freire, 1972). Offering parents a crucial part to play in their child’s education is an interesting point of discussion arising from this research project where parents...
are found to be interested, involved and responsible for their child’s learning.

Researcher: So what you are recognising there is… you need to have a reason to talk [to the teacher]…or…?

Parent: Not a reason… but.. uhh… an opportunity!

Learning stories were typically seen as the teachers’ story by the parents. The data collected showed that three centres had no child or parent voice in any of their learning stories from the past year. In this case teachers are positioned as having professional ownership over the child’s learning. Foucault (1972; 1977) sees knowledge as intertwined with power such that interactions between the teachers and children and parents can inherently set “norms”, with the teacher’s perspective standing in special regard if the other “protagonists” are not able to exercise their power in relation to the knowledge building. A power imbalance may create differing parent understandings of teacher jargon such as the term “learning aspirations” which may suggest to the parent that “learning” is about something more important than the child’s attributes with which they are familiar (Canella, 1997). Given this theoretical background, communities of practice or learning communities require mutual engagement, enabling the parent and the child to contribute their own ideas to the teaching–learning process, regardless of their level of communication or understanding of learning. A sense of self-efficacy and seeing their contributions in a positive light are important for both the parent and the child to feel confident enough to start building shared repertoires with the teachers (Wenger, 1998).

Manager and teacher involvement in the research

At the start of this research the expectation was that the managers and teachers of each centre would respond to the parents and the children who completed an initiating parent voice conversation. I found, however, that instead of sharing the parent and child voices with the teaching team, as had been suggested, three out of five centre managers decided not to share them. This finding is of concern as the literature shows that dialogue is a central part of the parent–teacher partnership and is capable of reducing power inequalities (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Rinaldi, 2006). The research question: “How does the use of the ‘initiating parent voice’ influence working parents’ perspectives on and involvement in their child’s learning?” anticipated empowering the child, teachers, and parents to become more collaboratively involved in the child’s learning.

It is important to note that this research did not target the teachers’ response, but parents were encouraged to bring the form that recorded the initiating parent voice back to the team and even let the child give the form to the teacher to share. Managers/teachers were encouraged to respond to what the parent had recorded, but this was essentially left up to the centre. The teacher response, or lack of it, affected the parents’ perceptions and interactions with their children. Because of this, interviews with the managers were included at the end of the research. One manager stated:

I think that sometimes there is so much focus put on this parent voice that I don’t think necessarily needs to be there…

I think parents … I think if parents do have something to say, they bring it, but I sometimes think we work so hard to get something that we might not necessarily need.

In terms of ongoing dialogue related to the initiating parent voice form, only parents of two centres experienced face-to-face interaction when receiving the form and only some parents from one centre received a response from the teachers on the return of the completed forms to the centre. This opens the question as to whether our partnership with parents gives rise to optimal opportunities for dialogue about planning for learning.

Conclusion

The photo and invitation to respond on the initiating parent voice form provide the parent with the opportunity to start a conversation with their child about a specific learning interest and to respond in such a way that both their own and their child’s voices are made evident. It is important for the child and the parent to take part in planning and learning. Not only does the initiating parent voice concept provide the child with an opportunity to share with their family the story of their learning across two contexts, but it also builds the child’s “identity as a learner” in a holistic way. In this research project, parents are taking an active part in listening to and documenting their child’s voice and the findings show that parents’ perspectives on their child’s learning have the potential to develop through the use of the initiating parent voice concept. Further research must investigate the roles and responsibilities of early childhood teachers in supporting parents and children to be at the centre of assessment and the teaching–learning process.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Diti Hill, from the University of Auckland, Faculty of Education and Social Work, for her support with my article.

References


