

Chapter 1

Partnerships in the Early Years Policy Context

Chapter focus

- Identify how partnerships are positioned within early years curricula and framework documents
- Understand the intersection between national and international approaches to partnerships as it shapes early years provision across Australia
- Examine effective early years practice as it reflects broader policy guiding the development of relationships with children, families and communities

Connie's story

Connie is an educator in a large, community-based early childhood education and care setting, where families attending come from a range of social and cultural backgrounds.

She described herself to me as 'a parent, a grandparent and a member of the community'. She does not have any formal qualifications in early childhood but does have over 20 years' experience—having worked as a cook, an integration aide and an assistant with every age group, and she spoke of this proudly. She respects parents and their role, and they respect her longevity—creating that sense of having knowledge based on years of experience, and parents would welcome this.

She was warm and engaging and I got the impression that she would see the families in the same context that she might see her own daughter or daughter-in-law seeking advice from her about their children. She spoke very much about the centre and the families and staff as being a family, and I really got a sense of how this would be. Her conversation showed a sense of empathy towards families, which guided how she viewed the parents making statements such as 'I can imagine going to another country and not knowing how to speak their language'.

While some of the other educators spoke of families as being difficult, scary or intimidating, Connie turned this around. She described these families as just needing time to develop trust and create a connection.

She described her role as that of teaching parents—telling them about the frameworks and about why it is important for the parents to maintain the child's first language.



Introduction

The findings arising from contemporary research that highlight the importance of quality relationships between early childhood years programs, families and the community have had a strong influence on the development of policy frameworks for early years service provision both in Australia and internationally. The introduction across Australia of the National Quality Agenda through the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Quality Standards (NQS), along with localised, state-based early years curricula and practice frameworks, are underpinned by notions of effective partnerships between services, families and the community. At the state level, policies and practice frameworks guiding the provision of early years programs also focus on the importance of relationships with families and the broader community.

This chapter will explore the notion of partnerships in the early years sector through an examination of a number of both national and international key policy and curriculum documents. It will introduce the national policies—The National Quality Framework including the quality standards, the National Regulations and the Early Years Learning Framework. It will introduce the notion of partnerships as they are highlighted within state-based curriculum documents such as the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework [0–8] (VEYLDF). It will also explore partnerships from an international perspective through examining how partnerships feature in approaches such as those adopted in early childhood settings in the Italian province of Reggio Emilia, which has provided a framework for guiding practice in many early childhood settings in Australia as well as internationally. Partnerships with families and communities also feature in the Developmentally Appropriate Practice Approach outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in the US. This approach has also influenced the development of early years curricula and practice frameworks

internationally, especially across South-East Asia. The chapter will also examine partnerships from the perspective of the Australian professional standards for teachers and draw connections between governing and policy bodies and professional practice.



The Australian policy context

Across the Australian education and care landscape, a number of recent policy framework documents have shaped the way schools and early childhood contexts engage in practices that recognise the connections between schools, families and the broader community. These documents have drawn on the wide body of research which acknowledges that when schools, communities and families work in partnership, outcomes for children are enhanced. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008), to which all Australian Education Ministers are signatories, commits to ensuring the provision of high-quality schooling for all Australian children by working together across all school sectors and the community. This Declaration outlines eight actions to support high-quality schooling of which one is to develop stronger partnerships. The Declaration supports the recognition of parents, carers and families as being the most important influence in a child's life and as instilling in children the values, attitudes and beliefs that shape children to contribute to the global community. It places a strong emphasis on the importance of developing strong partnerships with Indigenous families and communities, based on cross-cultural respect to build connections for young people to their schooling.

The National Family-Schools Partnership Agreement (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008) also recognises the importance of encouraging sustainable and effective partnerships between teachers, families, children and the broader school community. This guiding framework positions these partnerships as relationships in which each partner is valued and enabled to equally make decisions, respecting differences in the contributions. The framework also recognises that an effective partnership addresses any barriers and actively attempts to involve all families in their child's schooling. Based on a number of guiding principles which recognise that all families and schools share a mutual goal of wanting the best outcome for the

child and that an effective partnership is based on mutual responsibility, respect and trust, the framework provides a strategic direction for schools to work to strengthen connections between children, families and communities.

In 2009, COAG (the Council of Australian Governments) released the National Early Childhood Development Strategy, *Investing in the Early Years*, which was developed in order to provide a whole-of-government approach to responding to contemporary evidence highlighting the importance of the early childhood years and the benefits—and cost-effectiveness—of ensuring all children experience a positive early childhood. This strategy also highlighted the importance of families and the need to support families in providing positive outcomes for their children (p. 4). The strategy included the development of a National Quality Framework, which would include the creation of national quality standards, national regulations governing the licensing of early childhood services and the development of the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) to guide professional practice across the entire early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. Of particular importance to the COAG strategy was the expectation of early childhood educators that they create and foster positive partnerships with parents and communities.

The Early Years Learning Framework

The EYLF became the approved framework of practice for all early years educators across Australia and works in ensuring that children in all early childhood education and care settings experience quality teaching and learning. The EYLF is underpinned by specific emphasis on play-based learning and recognises the importance of communication and language (including early literacy and numeracy), and social and emotional development. (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009)

'The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is underpinned by specific emphasis on play-based learning to support communication, language, cognitive, and social and emotional development.'

Early childhood educators guided by the Framework will reinforce in their daily practice the principles laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention). The Convention states that all children have the right to an education that lays a foundation for the rest of their lives, maximises their ability, and respects their family, cultural, and other identities and languages. The Convention also recognises children's right to play and be active participants in all matters affecting their lives.

The Framework has been designed for use by early childhood educators working in partnership with families and, like the Melbourne Declaration, builds



on the premise that the family is a child's first and most influential educator. This recognises that children belong to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community. Like the Melbourne Declaration and the National Family-School Partnership Agreement, a guiding truism is that educators' practices and the relationships they form with children and families have a significant effect on children's involvement and success in learning. The EYLF builds on the body of research which acknowledges that children thrive when families and educators work together in partnership to support young children's learning. The practice principles all centre on relationships—relationships that are secure and respectful, create equity and respect diversity. Partnership has been identified as the second practice principle, stating that:

[L]earning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families. Educators recognise that families are children's first and most influential teachers. They create a welcoming environment where all children and families are respected and actively encouraged to collaborate with educators about curriculum decisions in order to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12).

'Children belong to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community. As such, it is their family which is a child's first and most influential educator.'

Recognising that some children and families experience barriers to achieving success, the EYLF guides educators to work in partnership with children, families, communities, other services and agencies to create an environment that supports successful outcomes. When early years educators respect the diversity of all families and communities, and the aspirations they hold for children,

they are able to foster children's motivation to learn and reinforce their sense of themselves as competent learners.

The EYLF presents partnerships as characterised by each partner:

- valuing each other's knowledge of each child
- valuing each other's contributions to and roles in each child's life
- trusting each other and communicating freely and respectfully with each other, sharing insights and perspectives about each child
- engaging in shared decision-making (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13).

The National Quality Standards

The National Quality Standard (NQS) is a key aspect of the National Quality Framework (NQF) and sets a high, national benchmark for early childhood education and care, and out of school hours care services in Australia (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2012).

The NQS brings together the seven key quality areas that are important to outcomes for children of which *Quality Area 6—Collaborative partnerships with families and communities* presents an expectation that educators engage in respectful and supportive relationships with families and build connections with the broader community. This quality area of the National Quality Standard focuses on collaborative relationships with families that are fundamental to achieving quality outcomes for children and community partnerships that are based on active communication, consultation and collaboration. Cantin, Plante, Coutu and Brunson (2012) identify that a strong parent–educator relationship has been found to be a positive predictor of children learning and engagement.

The NQS states that:

... partnerships with families contribute to building a strong, inclusive community within the service'. Shared decision making with families supports consistency between children's experiences at home and at the service, helping children to feel safe, secure and supported (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012, p. 148).

This Quality Area outlines three standards to shape educator practice.

Standard 6.1: Respectful and supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained

Drawing on the recent research and contemporary thinking, this standard focuses on the importance of educators developing and maintaining respectful and supportive relationships with all families.

Within this standard, educators' practices are shaped by the premise that respectful and supportive relationships with families are developed when communication is warm and respectful and where parents feel valued and accepted. In respectful and supportive relationships, decisions are shared, and everyone is working towards a common goal. Respectful and supportive relationships recognise the individuality of families and work collaboratively with all families to ensure they feel valued and involved in their child's learning even though they may not be active participants in the program. They recognise and celebrate the diversity of cultures, experiences and histories of all families, and the knowledge that this diversity brings to the setting in both building understanding and tolerance in the children, but also across the wider community.

Standard 6.2: Families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child-rearing are respected

This standard recognises and acknowledges the notion of parents as the child's first and most influential teachers. It is based on an understanding that effective outcomes for children are enhanced when educators and families work in partnership to ensure that the experiences and opportunities provided to support their learning and development are reflective of the diversity of families' culture and their lived experiences. This standard also recognises that culture, lived experiences and the connections families have with the community is an important influencing factor on the capacity of the family to support and nurture their children. The standard acknowledges that some families have very rich experiences that they draw upon to support their parenting role, while other families may be experiencing difficulties and life events that mean they are less able to access the supports needed to assist them in their role as parents.

Standard 6.3: The service collaborates with other organisations and service providers to enhance children's learning and wellbeing

Standard 6.3 recognises that children and families exist as members of larger communities and the wider society. The standard recognises that a complex service system is in place for children and families and in most communities the ECEC setting is one of a range of services that support children and families. It supports the importance of reciprocal relationships and building partnerships with organisations and other service providers to ensure that children's learning, development and wellbeing are supported and enhanced, recognising that for some families there is a need to access additional services and resources to

support them and their child to achieve optimum learning and development. When ECEC settings form collaborative relationships with other organisations and services providers, it creates greater opportunities for information sharing, joint problem solving and the development of best practice models. The standard seeks to ensure that the ECEC setting has an active presence in and connections with the local community. These connections enable the educators working with the child and family to gain greater understanding and insight into the family as it exists within this wider community context. Families are connected to others through the social connections they create and experience through their community connections.

This standard also recognises the importance for building and supporting the professional practice of the educator that connections and collaborative relationships with other organisations and professionals provide. Educators and teachers who are connected to other teachers, specialists and professional resources that are available in the community are able to build and reflect on their own practice as supporting positive outcomes for children and their families. When educators form collaborative relationships with other organisations and service providers, it creates greater opportunities for information sharing, joint problem solving and the development of best practice models. By engaging in professional conversations, accessing resources and materials not readily available in their own services and sharing ideas with other educators, teachers are able to continue to learn more about themselves as practitioners as well as continue to gain new understandings about how to facilitate and enhance children's learning and development.

Positioning partnerships across Australia

While the EYLF is the guiding framework for early years educators across Australia, at a state level, some jurisdictions have also developed more localised curriculum and practice documents for early years practice. In these instances, the localised framework documents align with the underpinning principles and practices outlined in the EYLF but extend these to present an expectation for early years professionals that more closely reflects the policy principles at the state level. This next section will explore two localised early years frameworks, the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework [0–8] (VEYLDF) and the Northern Territory Preschool Curriculum as examples of the way states and territories have built on the EYLF.

'While the EYLF is the guiding framework for all early childhood educators, in some jurisdictions localised framework documents are aligned with this to reflect policy principles at a state level.'

Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework [0–8 years]

Since 2011 the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework [0–8] (VEYLDF) has become the guiding document for professional practice across the state of Victoria for all programs and professionals engaging with children and their families in the early years, as well as in out of school hours care programs (OSHC). For Victoria, this document guides the practice of all early years educators working with children and families between birth and the early years of formal schooling. This document also links closely with the Victorian Curriculum that is implemented across schools in that state. The National Regulations state that all programs must work in accordance with a recognised early years framework, and in Victoria it is the VEYLDF that is followed. Like the EYLF, relationships with children, families and communities feature as key principles that drive educator practice across the state.

Developing effective partnerships with families and communities is identified as key to quality practice across all early years programs. This understanding is woven throughout the VEYLDF and across key state policy documents that guide early years practice. The VEYLDF supports the work of a range of services and professionals working with young children in Victoria. Not only is this policy framework guiding the practice of all early childhood education and care service provision, but it is also aimed at supporting teachers working with children in the early years of school and other community-based programs where children and families are engaged. These additional services include maternal and child health, early childhood intervention and specialist services and out of school hours care. The *Transition: a positive start to school* program incorporates the underpinning notion of quality partnerships with families and the broader community as essential for effective outcomes for children when transitioning into school.

Partnerships within the VEYLDF underpin the way educators are guided in their practice. Identifying eight principles for educator practice, the practice principle *Partnerships with families* (DET, 2016, p. 9) recognises that 'families are the primary influence on children's learning and development'. The framework recognises that a family has a unique perspective on their child through the long-standing relationship that exists between the child and his/her family. Shaped by Bronfenbrenner's theory of social ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the VEYLDF recognises that children exist within the broader context of family and community, and as such the family holds

valuable information about their child's strengths, abilities, interests and challenges. Early childhood professionals are guided to work in partnership with all families, and within communities, to build links between home and other settings in which a child is involved. Recognising that it is in the child's best interests for there to be effective, sustained, collaborative partnerships between families and all professionals, the VEYLDF acknowledges that for some families, engagement with educators and other key professionals in the child's life may be more difficult. For families who find it difficult to engage because of additional stressors, language barriers, or other socio-emotional factors, early childhood professionals need to develop multiple strategies to find other ways to communicate with families and to develop effective partnerships that will lead to these families overcoming barriers to equity and engagement. Using a theory of reciprocity, social ecology theory enables educators to examine the child, family and community by stepping into the 'shoes' of the other to explore different perspectives that shape family circumstances, while creating avenues for respectful and mutual sharing of ideas, opinions and knowledge. This leads to reciprocal understanding in which all perspectives are recognised and acknowledged, forming new shared understanding and mutual regard.

'Reciprocal relationships with families allow educators to 'step into the shoes' of the family to understand the different perspectives they bring to the partnership.'

The VEYLDF is shaped by the understanding that it is the effectiveness of the relationships that creates and maintains the connections between early years professionals, families, children and the community. In this, the VEYLDF guides educators to form relationships that are respectful, open, non-judgemental and honest. While this might 'go without saying', reflecting on and critically analysing the quality of the relationships is key to ensuring that the relationships that exist are mutually enabling the sharing of ideas, information and decision making. These mutual relationships create an environment in which consensus, negotiation and reciprocity are key components of all interactions.

Building relationships with other professionals supports continuity of learning and builds shared understanding about children and their families. The practice principle *Partnerships with professionals* (DET, 2016, p. 16) draws on Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti's (2005) notion of 'funds of knowledge', which is based on the premise that people are competent and have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge. 'Early childhood professionals working with young children have diverse disciplinary backgrounds, levels of training and experience. A culture of inquiry and challenge builds robust collaboration and continuous improvement' (DET, 2016, p. 16).



Developing effective and collaborative partnerships with professionals requires a recognition that each professional is working to a shared common goal. Effective communication which recognises that each discipline holds a unique view of the child and the family creates a context in which shared communication and shared knowledge can occur across disciplines and roles. Early childhood professionals develop and refine their expertise, respect their colleagues, care for their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others, and draw on the expertise of peers. They work in partnership to improve the quality of children's learning experiences and advance children's learning and development. Professionals across a range of early childhood education and care services, health services, family support services and schools have an equal role and responsibility for developing collaborative partnerships that can help to strengthen an integrated and consistent approach.

The Northern Territory Preschool Curriculum

Drawing from both the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework and the national Early Years Learning Framework, the Northern Territory's Preschool Curriculum places a strong emphasis on relationships with children, families and the broader community—especially for engaging with professionals to support optimum learning for children. Outlining eight practice principles for educators to support the preschool curriculum, partnerships with families and with professionals are highlighted. The Northern Territory Preschool Curriculum (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2017) recognises that 'families play a vital role in their children's learning. A child's sense of belonging is enhanced through the relationships built between families and preschool teachers

and early childhood professionals, and with other parents and children' (p. 9). In Practice principle 1—*Partnerships with Families* the curriculum recognises that 'working in partnership with families recognises their central role in children's lives'. As children's first teachers, families have valuable information about their child's strengths, abilities, interests and challenges. Practice principle 8—*Partnerships with professionals* outlines how educators can build continuity of learning and continuity of practice by forming respectful relationships with other professionals where a child (or family) may be in need of additional specialist support. This is particularly important when children move from one setting to another, or transition into preschool or from preschool to school.



International perspectives

The acknowledgement that outcomes for children are enhanced when educators, families and communities are connected and engaged in effective partnerships is not just a focus of the Australian policy and early years practice context. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project undertaken in the UK in the early 2000s found that 'where a special relationship in terms of shared *educational* aims had been developed with parents, and pedagogic efforts were made by parents at home to support children, sound learning took place even in the absence of consistently good pedagogic practice in the preschool setting' (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004, p. 37). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) through Starting Strong I, II, III and IV set out the first international comparative works in early childhood education and care policy across the OECD countries to expand access, ensure equity and enhance quality in ECEC service provision. The framework draws on contemporary research and literature to frame key policy levers. Engaging with families and communities has been identified as an important policy lever for enhancing healthy child development and learning. Within this policy is an understanding that parental partnership is critical in enhancing ECEC staff knowledge about the children. Community engagement is also increasingly seen as an important policy lever. Community engagement creates connections between families, the ECEC settings and other services for children. When families have strong connections with their communities this creates social networks to support parents. This leads to reduced stress and a source for accessing resources in an environment that promotes social cohesion (OECD, 2012).

In Finland the national curriculum for early childhood supports a strong partnership between parents and staff for collaboration in supporting children's growth, development and learning. This curriculum document draws upon the acknowledged belief that parents have the primary right to and responsibility for their child's education, and they also know their child well. The document identifies that it is the responsibility of educators to create conditions that are favourable for creating partnerships and collaboration on equal terms. This requires mutual trust, respect and equality (Heikkilä, Ihalainen & Välimäki, 2004, p. 28).

The development of the EYLF complements a number of these international approaches, which all position families at the centre of children's lives. There are two distinct approaches that are often drawn upon to guide practice in many Australian ECEC settings, and more recently many early years programs in schools. The philosophies and practices found in the Reggio Emilia Approach (found in preschools and infant and toddler programs in the township of Reggio Emilia in Italy) and the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), a model that underpins many curricula approaches worldwide, are increasingly being adopted and incorporated into curriculum design and pedagogies in planning programs for young children. In both of these frameworks, the importance of the relationships with children, families and the communities are central.

The Reggio Emilia Approach

Respectful relationships lie at the centre of the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA). The interactions between children and children, children and adults, and teachers and families are fundamental to the philosophy of the REA. Relationships are always seen as reciprocal, requiring mutual trust and respect.

'In the Reggio Emilia Approach, relationships lie at the centre of teacher practice. These are seen as reciprocal and collaborative, based on mutual trust and respect.'

The REA was forged in the early 1950s in the Italian township of Reggio Emilia led by Loris Malaguzzi and his close friend, the educator Bruno Ciari (Cadwell, 2003). Reggio schools were founded and supported by a community that wanted to provide a new way of learning for children. There is an expectation in the schools in Reggio Emilia that teachers are active participants within the community and work to provide an environment where there is constant dialogue between parents, teachers, administrators and elected

officials. The community as a learning space is also a key component of the curriculum. Recognising that schools exist within the community in which children and families live, learning is taken outside of the classroom and projects that incorporate the places and spaces of children's lives are developed as mechanisms to build children's agency, connections and sense of self. The community itself must have a place to speak in the curriculum (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999) and community participation has been viewed as a means of stimulating cooperation between educators and parents (Spaggiari, 1998). The REA positions schools as having a responsibility to give back to the community and 'to make their ideals and aspirations visible within the city and understood by all' (Thornton & Brunton, 2014, p. 65). Rinaldi (2006) suggests that educators should not forget how closely the school is connected to the society in which it is situated. She goes on to suggest that 'a community has to have places where it can develop its image of the child, its image of childhood' (p. 140).

In the REA, the school sits within and interacts with its own social and cultural environment. The environment as the third teacher is a fundamental underlying element of the Reggio Emilia Approach. In thinking about the role that the environment plays on learning and development, it is important to move away from a focus on the physical space that children are engaged with to explore 'environment' more systemically to recognise that children exist within an environment that is centred on families, communities and society. The social and cultural environment of children's lives in the context of their families and communities shapes the values, beliefs and behaviours that are socially



constructed and builds children's identity and sense of being. Understanding the role of the environment as third teacher recognises that families are children's first and most influential teacher.

Parents in Reggio-inspired programs are viewed as an essential resource in decision making around their child's learning. Teachers who use the REA take into account the needs and desires of the parents. The exchange of ideas between parents and teachers is vital in creating a more positive and productive learning environment. The REA recognises that parents are interested in their child's learning but perhaps in different ways to that of the educators. Parents are participants who bring with them a particular point of view as well as values; they need to feel that the school respects them and above all respects and values their children. Parents are expected to be active participants in the life of the schools and in REA the education of young children is truly seen as a shared responsibility in which both parents and educators enter into a negotiated relationship where a deepening of shared understanding occurs. The individuality that parents bring in terms of their own background and personal story recognises the diversity of families. Listening to the stories that families bring is about not only listening to and accepting these differences, but also engaging with these differences. This enables us to let go of any truths we consider to be absolute, being open to doubt and giving value to negotiation as a strategy of the possible. It leads to reciprocal understanding where new ways of thinking are generated.

Reciprocal and respectful relationships are founded on a belief that parents are active agents in the decision making regarding their child. Reciprocal relationships are not based on the educator providing 'uncontextualised and unproblematised information about what the educators are doing, nor is it educating parents in good practice by transmitting information about child development and child rearing' (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 77). Active democratic relationships involve processes in which decision making and discussion are done collectively and collaboratively, and parents are highly involved. 'The participation of parents should not be viewed as a threat but as an intrinsic element of collegiality and as the integration of different wisdoms' (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 104).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) was adopted in 1998 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) as part of the accreditation process for early childhood programs in the United States.

DAP refers to ‘applying child development knowledge in making thoughtful and appropriate decisions about early childhood practices’ (Gestwicki, 2007, p. 9). Like other approaches, a key underpinning belief that ‘children must be considered within the context of their family, culture and community, past history and present circumstances’ (Gestwicki, 2007, p. 10). The NAEYC Position Statement (2009) states clearly that ‘practice is not developmentally appropriate if the program limits “parent involvement” to scheduled events ... if the program/family relationship has a strong “parent education orientation”’. DAP is based on notions of partnership in which the knowledge each holds is valued, shared and welcomed. The Statement goes on to state that ‘parents do not feel like partners in the relationship when staff members see themselves as having all the knowledge and insight about children and view parents as lacking such knowledge’. In DAP the understanding of reciprocity in the relationship is important. In reciprocal relationships there is mutual respect, cooperation and shared decision making around mutually agreed goals. Educators work in collaborative partnerships with families through establishing and maintaining relationships in which families feel welcome. In DAP, families are seen as key sources of information about the child and teachers and families share knowledge with each other. Families participate in decisions about the program. Partnerships in DAP are mutually constructed. Families’ choices are acknowledged and valued, but educators work with families in mutual decision making to ensure that children’s learning and development is supported in the programs provided.

The cultural dimensions of families are of key importance when building relationships with families that are based on reciprocal and respectful interactions. DAP is built on the premise that understanding children’s development requires looking at each child through a sociocultural lens, which positions the child in the context of their family, early years setting, community and the broader society. The various contexts are interconnected, and all intersect as powerful influences on the child. When examining culture in this context, it is the customs, beliefs and patterns of behaviour that are ‘inculcated by the society’ (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 45). These include religious, social, language and customs of the society, but also values, beliefs and expected behaviours. Valuing and respecting the culture that families bring to the setting is important to build reciprocal relationships. However, partnerships are predicated on reciprocity and mutuality. When the values of the family are in opposition to the values of the early years setting, respectful conversations that lead to shared decision making are integral components of the relationship. In this, educators must recognise their role is not to have ‘all the right answers, but to open dialogue that allows them to learn from each family as well as share their knowledge’ (Gestwicki, 2007, p. 413).



The Professional Standards for Teachers

Working with parents and the broader communities is a key expectation of teachers as outlined in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, 2011). The Professional Standards for Teachers have been developed to reflect and build on national and international evidence that a teacher's effectiveness has a powerful impact on students and that teacher quality is the single most important factor influencing student achievement. The Standards have been developed to support the Melbourne Declaration in which improving teacher quality is considered an essential reform as part of Australia's efforts to improve student attainment and ensure it has a world class system of education.

The Professional Standards for Teachers comprise seven Standards, which outline what teachers should know and be able to do. The Standards are interconnected, interdependent and overlapping. The Standards are grouped into three domains of teaching: Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Engagement. The Professional Engagement domain focuses on how teachers demonstrate respect and professionalism in all their interactions with students, colleagues, parents/carers and the community. This domain outlines for teachers the expectation that they are sensitive to the needs of parents/carers and can communicate effectively with them about their children's learning. Included within this domain is an expectation that teachers will create opportunities to engage with their school communities within and beyond the classroom and understand the links between school, home and community in the social and intellectual development of their students.

Sitting within the Professional Engagement Domain is *Standard 7—Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community*. Two specific focus areas are outlined within this Standard:

7.3 Engage with the parents/carers

7.4 Engage with professional teaching networks and broader communities

As teachers build their proficiency as teachers and move from the graduate level to the more highly accomplished and lead teacher levels, the way teachers demonstrate and engage with families and communities becomes more embedded in practice. These two focus areas demand that teacher practice understands the importance of working effectively with families and communities and to progressively build and implement strategies that create

opportunities to initiate sensitive and respectful communications with families and engage families in their children's learning as well as contributing to the educational priorities of the school. Highly accomplished teachers will build productive links with the wider community to improve teaching and learning outcomes for students and will engage in professional networks to broaden not only their own knowledge but to contribute to the learning and development of others.

Sitting within *Standard 3—Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning*, focus area 3.7—Engage parents/carers in the educative process also guides teachers to develop strategies for involving parents and families in their child's learning and in the wider school community.

Teacher registration in many jurisdictions across Australia is dependent upon teachers demonstrating practice as reflecting the Professional Standards for Teachers. Teachers reflecting on their practice as it supports the policy guidelines, the research and literature and demonstrates an understanding of the relationship that exists between teachers, schools, children, families and the broader community creates an opportunity to build practice that is representative of these key focus areas.

Summary

There are a number of key themes that are constant across each of the policy practice approaches. Fundamental to each discussion is a recognition of the importance of the relationships between children, adults, families and the community. These relationships are more than just a sharing of information but are truly based on mutual, respectful and reciprocal relationships that engage families and communities actively in the curriculum. A recurring message across the chapter is that children must always be viewed within the context of their family and community. It is continually recognised that parents have knowledge and understanding of the child that is unique, and when shared with that brought by the educator, new deeper understanding emerges that can then shape the learning and development of the child through interactions that are reciprocal and valued.

Schools and early childhood settings cannot exist as an isolated community but rather as a microcosm of the larger diverse and active community in which it is positioned. This community is impacted by and in turn has an impact on the individuals who create this community, and who bring the values, beliefs and practices of this community into building the community that exists within the school.

Reflective questions

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The policy and practice frameworks outlined in this chapter have provided a context for examining our own beliefs and understanding about the interactions and relationships that are enacted in early years settings.

1. What are the key underpinning principles, values and beliefs that emerge when analysing each of the policy and practice frameworks presented in this chapter? How have these informed your practice?
2. The story of Connie in the case study presents an educator who values the role of parents in their children's learning. In exploring this case study, in what ways does Connie's practice reflect the key themes central to the policy and practice frameworks presented in this chapter?
3. What evidence can you draw on from your own practice that reflects these key principles of practice?

References

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