Moving theory into practice: How early years educators can give children the best start possible

Anthony Semann
Director Semann & Slattery
PhD Candidate Macquarie University

About Semann & Slattery
Our Services
- Training
- Organisation development and change
- Life and leadership coaching
- Research
- Evaluation
- Market research
- Strategic planning
- Facilitation
- Mentoring
- Publications
- Social planning
- Community consultation

Discussion
What are the challenges and opportunities which may arise through (1) moving towards and (2) delivering integrated programs?

Challenges and opportunities
- Developing a convincing argument for integrated programs – moving into the unknown
- Convincing key stakeholders of the benefits, challenges and opportunities that arise through new ways of working together
- Working through the structural elements of integration – location, staffing etc
- Knowing what you do and how to articulate this to others

How do you define ‘inclusion’

What are the markers of an ‘inclusive program’

What are the challenges you face in ‘building an inclusive program’

Exclusion
Inclusion
- Difference is seen as a deficit
- Differences need fixing
- Access/participation a privilege
- Someone else’s responsibility
- Accepted with reluctance
- Some families have a voice
- Environments rigid & inflexible
- “One size fits all” model
- Service/staff are experts
- Barriers between service and families
- Difference is seen as normal
- Differences are celebrated
- Access/participation a right
- Our responsibility
- Accepted unconditionally
- All families have a voice
- Environments flexible & responsive
- Program considers strengths, needs and interests of all children
- Shared expertise
- Partnerships with service and families

Adapted from Gunn, A. et al. (2004)
Building Connections with Families

The Birthday Cake

• What does it mean to work in collaboration with families and other programs?
• Whose agenda is being served within our programs?
• Which voices are heard?
• Which voices matter?
• What focus do our programs have?
• What really matters?
• What could integrated programs have offered me?

You know what I have to say about that.
#$%@ off!!

They said...

They said... they said he was beautiful

I'm Sorry
When I speak, someone else doesn’t. Silence opens space for others to announce themselves.

Silin (1999)

What are the issues at hand

- Our theoretical frameworks are narrowly defined or are dominated by particular knowledge’s
- We find change hard to deal with
- We enjoy certainty
- We yearn for legitimacy however believe this is born through consensus
- We don’t want to rock the boat
- We underestimate the power of our knowledge, theories and wisdom

The three c’s of integrated services

Collaborate
Critical reflection
Conversation

Collaborate: work jointly on an activity, to produce or create something

Critical reflection involves:
- Assumption analysis – Involves thinking in such a manner that it challenges our beliefs, values, cultural practices, and social structures in order to assess their impact on our daily actions.
- Contextual awareness – Realising that our assumptions are socially and personally created in a specific historical and cultural context.

Conversation: the informal exchange of ideas by spoken words

Our passion for seeking the truth

Scully – in search of the truth through traditional knowledge
Mulder – a post modernist at heart, seeking to unravel the taken for granted
What does ‘truth’ offer us

- Certainty – an ability to understand what lies ahead with little or no risk of failure
- Persuasiveness – an ability to convince others based on what we ‘know’
- Validity and legitimacy – an ability to speak with conviction

What does uncertainty offer us

- Risk – a fear that what lies ahead of us is unknown
- Failure – a heightened risk of getting it wrong
- Scrutiny – opening up the possibility of losing legitimacy in the eyes of those around us

What does ‘truth’ offer us

- Certainty – an ability to understand what lies ahead with little or no risk of fear
- Certainty – the risk of not venturing into new unknown grounds where what awaits us is of greater value
- Persuasiveness – the risk of not progressing politically given our passion in applying old knowledge to new challenges
- Validity and legitimacy – losing sight of contemporary research and practice theory

Skilled dialogue

- Anchored understanding of diversity
- 3rd space
- RESPECT
  - Acknowledging range of validity of diverse perspectives
  - Establishing interactions that allow equal voice for all perspectives
  - Communicating understanding that others’ perspective has a positive intent
- RECIPROCITY
  - Staying with the tension of differing perspectives
  - Creating opportunities for equalising power across interactions
  - Collaboratively crafting a response that integrates and accesses strengths of diverse perspectives
- RESPONSIVENESS

Considering the 3rd space

3rd space is a skill and a mindset that focuses on creatively reframing contradictions into paradoxes.

As a mindset, 3rd space supports respectfully holding divergent and sometimes contradictory views in one’s mind at a time, without forcing choice between them.

What does this mean for you as a practitioner?

3rd space in practice

The 3rd space invites practitioners to make a fundamental shift from a dualistic and exclusive perception of reality to an integrative, inclusive perspective that focuses on the complementary aspects of diverse values, communications, behaviours and beliefs, which can lead to a 3rd choice.
The history of childhood

“For the first time in history, the idea that a society’s destiny rests on how it treats its children has concrete foundations, and the implications demand our attention.”

[Grille, 2005, p. xvii]

History of Childhood – Prior 1700’s

Infanticide, child abuse and child sexual abuse were universal. In three decades of exhaustive and meticulous research, de Mause ‘found that by today’s standards no pre 20th century parent would escape prosecution for abuse and neglect” (de Mause cited in Grille, 2005, p. 20)

What will future sociologist think of current day practices?

Theorists, Philosophers and Physicians

1690 - John Locke: At birth a child’s mind was a blank slate and empty of ideas. Parents could inscribe what they willed.

1690 - John Hersey: Spare the rod spoil the Child

1749 - Rousseau: spoke up against wet nursing and swaddling comparing it to crucifixion. Rousseau pleaded with parents to nurture their babies at home.

1900 - Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychosexual development. Currently Dr Sue Greishaber explores the topic of children’s sexuality and related behaviours, and how staff in early childhood programs might deal with this. Freud also coined the term ‘separation anxiety’.

1900 - Froebel: Was the father of Kindergarten (child’s garden) a place where children were to be nurtured and loved and nurtured like plants. He developed twenty gifts which form the basic elements in most early childhood programs. Such as blocks, geometric shapes, sewing, drawing, etc. These gifts were elements of the natural world.

1907 - Truby King: Advocated a forceful approach to feeding, and improved methods of coping with crying, sleeping and other nursery problems. Founder of Mothercraft and Karitane nursing.

1910 - Montessori: Teaching methods encouraging toddlers to learn order much earlier than thought possible. Children taught life skills and social graces. In initial groups were made up of street children.

1910 - Rudolph Steiner: An infant, says Steiner, begins her life in a dreamlike state. Her consciousness, meaning her perception of being a part of the outer world, is sleeping. Growth during the first three years of life involves a gradual awakening of consciousness and emotions. He likens a child’s development and growth to nature.

1916 - John Dewey: Dewey was a relentless campaigner for reform of education, pointing out that the authoritarian strict, pre-ordained knowledge approach of modern traditional education was too concerned with delivering knowledge, and not enough with understanding students’ actual experiences.
Theorists, Philosophers and Physicians

1920 - Jean Piaget: Cognitive development and believed that children learn through sensory play and move through linear stages of development. Children were born with innate desire to explore and solve problems.

1928 - John B. Watson: A behaviourist who believed that everything in the environment that a child grew up in was wholly responsible for shaping the child. “The world would be considerably better off if we were to stop having children for twenty years (except for experimental purposes) and were then to start again with enough facts to do the job with some degree of skill and accuracy”.

1945 - Benjamin Spock: Daily stimulation from loving parents. Parents need to respond to their children in an instinctive and natural way. Was met with huge popularity in the time following the second world war in the “You’ve never had it so good years”.

1953 - John Bowlby: Proposed the attachment theory. That a child’s first three years should be spent with the mother. Whilst often used as evidence against children accessing formal care before the age of three, Bowlby was referring to children were either homeless or institutionalised. Bowlby also spoke out against controlled crying. Bowlby was of the opinion that the damage done in the early years through maternal deprivation may be irreversible.

1987 - Sue Bredekamp: Whilst Director of NAEYC in 1987 wrote “Developmentally Appropriate Practice”. A manual that guided early childhood practices internationally. Currently Postmodern theorists challenge DAP as linear, and not culturally or contextually relevant to children’s learning.

2005 - Margaret Sims links high and sustained cortisol levels to stressed infants in poor, satisfactory and good quality programs. Only in programs that were high quality were the levels normal in infants tested.

Maria Aarts: MARTE MEO is derived from the Latin “mars martis”, a term used in mythology to express “On one’s own strength”. This is the central MARTE MEO focus at all the various levels to encourage people to use their own strengths and skills to advance and stimulate developmental processes on the part of children, parents, professional caregivers and supervisors and thus learn to optimally utilise their capacities.

Dr. Emmi Pikler recognized the need to offer an environment where children are respected and nurtured to become emotionally and socially mature individuals, able to adjust to the needs of others and of society.

The important of intentional approaches to practice

“Children are changed as a result of their child-care experiences. How they are changed and what they learn can come without thought or planning, or the changes can be planned for in a systematic way” (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer-Eyer, p.26)

“It is not good enough that infants receive good care. It must be excellent!” (Gerbner, 1985; cited in Petrie & Owen, 2007, p83)

What theories, frameworks and pedagogical approaches inform your approach to working with children and families?

How is ‘quality’ defined within your program?
What makes for a good childhood

“Put simply, children need love, affection, care and developmental opportunities from people who are attuned to and responsive to their needs. They are well supported when they find these not just from their parents and siblings, but from other significant adults in their lives and from peers. In turn, the adults in children’s lives are better able to nurture children when they are in supportive communities that take the experiences, needs, interests and development of children seriously.”

Press, 2006 pg6

Underpinning of quality service provision

Structural components of programs are an important contributive factor which can enhance quality for children.

Structural elements include qualifications, ratios, group sizes and the environment.

Process components of programs are an important contributive factor which can enhance quality for children.

Process elements include child: carer relationships, continuity of care, communication between the significant others in children’s lives.

Improved Ratios...

• Means that children would be more likely to have positive interactions with caregivers

• Enable caregivers to have more positive, nurturing interactions with children in their programs and provide them with more individualised attention

• Means that children in programs would display less apathy and distress and greater social competence

Continuity of Staff...

• Means that children in programs are engaged in more talk and play and display more gestural and vocal imitation

• Means more developmentally appropriate care giving and sensitivity, more contact (e.g., talking, playing, touching, and laughing)

• Means higher rates of secure attachments between children and adults

• Means more verbal communication between staff and children, which fosters language development in children.

The Research Around Continuity of Staff

• The US National Child Care Staff Study [1989] found that children in centres with higher staff turnover rates spent less time engaged in social activities with peers and more time in aimless wandering

• Research into staff turnover shows that it compromises the quality of the program and impacts negatively on child-staff interactions.

• Continuity of teaching staff is in the best interests of children, families and staff, and also of the programs themselves
We know that poor quality services place children at risk. Mediocre education and care will, at best, be custodial and at worst damaging. On the other hand, a high quality early childhood service is a dynamic space for children and families which creates and enhances family and community networks, becomes a trusted source of information and support, provides children with caring and nurturing learning programs, and where appropriate, specialist intervention. Quality makes a difference in children’s lives, determining the nature of their daily experiences and influencing their development in school and throughout the rest of their lives”. (Press, 2006 pg 30)

Tensions in quality, tensions in integration

- Ideas about children
- Ideas about curriculum
- Connotations of the term ‘care’
- Connotations of the term ‘education’
- Ideas about theories

Can you think of other tensions that may exist?

Existing model | Integration | Challenges and opportunities
---|---|---
Ideas about children | | |
Ideas about curriculum | | |
Connotation of the term ‘care’ | | |
Connotation of the term ‘education’ | | |
Ideas about theories | | |

Transformative learning (or transformational learning) is a process of getting beyond gaining factual knowledge alone to instead become changed by what one learns in some meaningful way.

It involves questioning assumptions, beliefs and values, and considering multiple points of view, while always seeking to verify reasoning.

Over arching questions to guide reflection include:

- What are my understandings of each child?
- What theories, philosophies and understandings shape and assist my work?
- Who is advantaged when I work in this way? Who is disadvantaged?
- What aspects of my work are not helped by the theories and guidance that I usually draw on to make sense of what I do?
- Are there other theories or knowledge that could help me to understand better what I have observed or experienced? What are they? How might those theories and that knowledge affect my practice? (EYLF 2009)

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.
Some final thoughts

- The silos of our practice are self created
- Building cross profession relationships is a must
- Working in collaboration with families is a must
- Power with not power over people
- Re-imagine theories in order to enhance what you do
- Trouble the long held truths
- Talk, debate, question
- Don’t shut down in the face of adversity

Courage doesn’t always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, “I will try again tomorrow.”

(Mary Anne Radmacher)
Transforming Organisations and People