Chapter 14
Partnering in the Periphery

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14.1 Introduction

The family is a fundamental contributor to a child's learning and development. It is the primary context in which learning takes place and, in usual circumstances, is a consistent and important component of a child's life. The family is also diverse, and although some families might share certain characteristics, no two families are exactly the same. Similarly, educators play an important role in nurturing the education and developmental outcomes of young children. The contributions that they make to children's lives are significant. Educators are also diverse and as such have different skills, characteristics, experiences and personalities that they bring to their interactions and work with children. When families and educators come together to support the learning and development of children it is a complex undertaking that is unique and multifaceted.

A variety of researchers around the globe have highlighted the benefits of families and educators coming together to support the learning and development of children (Ahtola et al. 2011; Daniel 2011; Gillanders et al. 2012). Such benefits include gains in academic achievement (Galindo and Sheldon 2012; Siraj-Blatchford 2010); increased family involvement in school-based learning (Ahtola et al. 2011), and improved social and developmental outcomes (Sylva et al. 2010). However, despite the wide recognition of such benefits, *how* families and educators might come together to support the learning and development of children in practice remains an ambiguous notion.

Over the past few decades there has been a variety of different models of family-educator partnership presented in the research literature, each with their own unique conceptualisation of what the action of coming together to support the learning and

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development of children might resemble (Epstein 1987, 1995, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997; Rosenberg et al. 2009). Such models emphasise different aspects of relationship and provide different insights into the complexities involved in coming together. They also position educators and families in different ways and highlight different challenges and opportunities. For example, Epstein and colleagues place emphasis on the shared responsibility of parents, educators and community in supporting the learning and development of children by highlighting the synergies between them (overlapping spheres of influence). According to Epstein and colleagues when there is little synergy, several strategies must be put in place to build on and work toward collaboration (Epstein and Sheldon 2006). In contrast, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's psychological model of parent involvement places emphasis on the role and perspective of parents in children's learning and development. This model highlights parents as the most important influence in supporting the learning and development of children and therefore positions families at the core of all interaction (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997).

Different models of family-educator partnership also conceptualise and define the term 'partnership' in different ways. Such conceptualisations and definitions include partnership portrayed as parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997); shared responsibility (Epstein and Sheldon 2006); family engagement *and* shared responsibility (Rosenberg et al. 2009); and partnership as enabler and empowerer (Dunst et al. 1992). Such difference highlights the complexity of the nature of coming together and the different motivators sitting behind the family-educator partnership rhetoric.

Whilst models of family-educator partnership provide important understanding into how families and educators might come together to support the learning and development of children, individual models do not account for all diversity, and therefore might stifle opportunity, or set people up for failure when used as recipes for success or as measures of effectiveness. Each model emphasises different aspects of family-educator partnership, and places priority on different elements of action. In essence they should not be used as a prescriptive formula for coming together, but each model acts as a guide to be adapted and changed according to people, needs and context over time.

Educators and families are drawn together through a variety of circumstance and situation, and family-educator partnerships come into fruition in different ways. For over a decade there has been growing consensus around the world that the best outcomes for children occur when educators and families come together to support their learning and development (Allen 2009; Boethel 2003; Fantuzzo et al. 2004; Melhuish et al. 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002). Therefore it is reasonable to suggest that determining the optimal times to develop such connections is important. The Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group suggest that, as children make the transition to school 'an opportunity to establish and maintain positive, respectful collaboration between home and school contexts that sets a pattern for ongoing interaction' (2011, p. 2) emerges.

The transition to school is a unique life transition in that although children have agency within the process, the responsibility of many of the decisions during this

time lies with the adults who support them. It is also a transition that extends beyond the child, as families and educators also adjust to new circumstances and come in to contact with new people, new roles and new relationships (Dockett et al. 2012). In relation to family-educator partnerships, the transition to school provides the impetus or reason for the adults in the lives of young children to come together. It also lays the foundations for family-educator partnerships to emerge as adults navigate and work through change both individually and collectively, and provides a space for supporting the travel of children's learning between and across different contexts.

In the remainder of this chapter, data from a wider project that examined adult relationships as children make the transition to school are shared. The data presented in this chapter reports on a family-educator partnership that emerged within the wider project.

14.2 The Wider Research Project

This chapter presents data from a project that examined the processes that adults engaged in and with, when coming together to support the mathematical understandings of children making the transition to school. The project drew on a Design Based Research (DBR) methodology (Herrington et al. 2007). DBR is a pragmatic research approach that is conducted *with* people rather than *on* people. It is cyclic in nature and is embedded in real world contexts (Herrington et al. 2007). In the wider study DBR was drawn upon to create two teams at two different sites (research teams). Each research team consisted of a prior-to-school (PTS) educator, a first-year-of-school (FYS) educator, and the families of the children making the move to school. The teams were provided with a brief to establish the existing mathematical understandings of children and to devise a plan that would support those understandings as the children made the move to school. No direction was provided as to how this might be achieved in practice, although regular team meetings provided the researcher with the opportunity to pursue different avenues and guide the teams in different ways. The purpose of the wider project was to study the processes that were engaged in and with at the two different sites.

14.3 The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework employed was the Indigenous lens of the Cultural Interface (Nakata 2002). The Cultural Interface is a lens of convergence in that it provides a way to examine the spaces that lie between individuals. As children make the move to school these spaces emerge and are created as the adults in the lives of young children come together. When used as a conceptual framework the Cultural Interface provides a way to not only understand how individuals come together but

also to study what emerges through such meeting (Nakata 2002). Throughout the project, moving beyond the juxtaposition of 'us' and 'them' and into the space that emerges when difference meets, provided a way to examine adult relationships as they came into being.

Nakata (2007) describes the Cultural Interface as 'a space of many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, language, agendas, aspirations and responses' and 'also a space that abounds with contradictions, ambiguities, conflict and contestation of meanings that emerge from…various shifting intersections' (p. 199). He further suggests that through this space, shared and new meanings can be created and recreated over time (Nakata 2002).

The conceptual framework of the Cultural Interface opens up new ways of thinking about the meeting of difference by drawing on a theoretical platform that has been developed in response to postcolonialism, and through feminist theoretical underpinnings (Anderson 2009). However, the Cultural Interface moves beyond postcolonialism in that it rejects the representation of the "collective other" by focusing explicitly on the individuals, and the space that is created when different people meet. When drawn on as a theoretical lens, the Cultural Interface provides a way to explicate what emerges as difference comes together, and also the possibilities that might arise through, and because of, such meeting. This moves analysis beyond notions of difference and into the space that is created through convergence.

The Cultural Interface was used as the basis for exploring the processes adults engaged in as they came together to support the mathematical learning of children making the transition to school.

14.4 Partnering at the Periphery

14.4.1 Background Information

The data discussed in this chapter were derived from the research team at Site 1. This team was conceptualised as consisting of a PTS educator, a FYS educator and the families of the children who would be making the transition to the primary school the following year. During the recruitment stage of the project the families at Site 1 were invited to be active members of the research team by attending team meetings and assisting in the creation of the plan that would support the mathematical understandings of the children making the transition to the primary school. The families at this site communicated that, while they were interested in what transpired and were prepared to talk to the educators about their children's mathematical understandings, that they did not want to be active members of the team or involved in the creation of the plan that was to be developed. Reasons provided included a lack of expertise in mathematics, a lack of time to engage, and a perception that

planning to support the mathematical understandings of children is "educators work".

As a consequence, data were not collected *from* families but rather *about* interactions with families (through the reports of educators). Appropriate University and Education Department ethics approval were granted to conduct the research, and families were made aware of the project and its intent through the initial recruitment stages.

14.4.2   Participants and Settings

The PTS educator worked at Site 1 for three days per week The FYS educator at Site 1 was the only FYS educator at her school. This government school was the feeder school for the prior-to-school setting (that is, most of the children attending the PTS setting would make the transition into the FYS setting). Both the PTS setting and the FYS settings were located in what is identified by the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013) as disadvantaged. A broad definition of "families" guided this project: Families were considered to include the primary adults who were responsible for the day-to-day care of the child who was making the transition to school.

Both educators at Site 1 were experienced teachers, having both been in their current roles for more than 10 years. Both the school principal at Site 1 and the director of the PTS setting involved were very supportive of the project and the participation of their staff. While the educators had met prior to their participation in the research project, they had not worked closely together.

14.5   Partnership at Site 1

The project involved providing the research teams at the two different sites with a brief to meet, find out the existing mathematical understandings of children, and devise a plan to support that mathematics as children made the move to school. In order to facilitate this process, the educators were released from teaching responsibilities for 3 h each week to work and spend time in each other's context. A component of this time was spent interacting with families in the PTS setting. The researcher provided this time release by working as a teacher in each of the different settings. The project took place during the last half of the school year and data were collected via recorded team meetings (where the progress of the team toward meeting the design brief was discussed), participant diaries, researcher field notes and email correspondence. The data presented in this chapter has been derived from the transcribed team meetings and participant diaries at Site 1.

14.5.1 Team Meetings

Throughout the project, there were four team meetings; three before and one after the children had started school. There was also an introductory meeting where the focus for the project was discussed and the intervention was refined to meet local needs. All meetings were structured as conversational interviews (Burgess-Limerick and Burgess-Limerick 1998). Conversational interviews are 'established interactively' and each 'individual and situation produces a unique agenda that allows the researcher to ground the research completely in the experiences of participants' (Burgess-Limerick and Burgess-Limerick 1998, p. 64). All team meetings – apart from the introductory meeting – were video recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The families were not involved in any of the team meetings. As noted previously, when approached to be part of the project, the families at Site 1 were reluctant to be actively involved in the team meetings, but were happy to discuss their children with the educators, and also happy for the educators to gather information and devise a plan that would support the mathematical understandings of their children.

   The team meetings provided an opportunity for the educators to discuss their progress toward meeting the brief of creating a plan that would support the mathematical learning of children making the transition to school. It also provided an opportunity for the educators to share and discuss information about their interactions with families, and to draw on this information to develop and refine their plan. Even though the families were not physically involved in this process, the information garnered *from* families was used to formulate the plan that would support the mathematical learning of children as they made the move to school. With the permission of the families, this involved sharing information learned from families with one another (educator to educator). It also involved identifying components of the plan that would need to be shared and clarified with families, and adjusting the plan accordingly. The following section of this chapter provides insight into this process.

14.5.2 Working with Families

During the recruitment stage of the project many of the families at Site 1 communicated that they had little confidence in their own mathematical understandings and because of this, they perceived that they had nothing of value to offer to the educators in any formal planning stages. In the initial stages of the project, when this was communicated to the PTS educator at Site 1, rather than dismiss the notion of working closely with families, she suggested that the families did have something to offer, but that *it might just take some time for them to realise [that] what they know can help.* This sentiment was also expressed by the PTS educator during the first team meeting when she suggested to the FYS educator that *these parents don't*

realise they can help that's the problem. You're going to need to tell them you need their help otherwise nothing will be offered.

Knowing when and when not to partner is a difficult notion for educators, and one that has received little attention in the research literature. It relies on educators' intuition and knowledge of the families within their contexts, a pre-existing (or the building of a new) relationship between the educator and families, and also a high level of educator social and emotional intelligence. Mayer et al. (1999) suggest that in relation to emotional intelligence it involves 'an ability to recognise the meanings of emotions and their relationships, and to reason and problem-solve on the basis of them' (p. 234).

In this situation, the families at Site 1 had previously communicated that they did not want to be active participants in the research project. However, the FYS educator at this site (who had an existing relationship with the families) perceived that what the families had to offer would make a valuable contribution to the project and, in turn, a positive contribution to children's mathematics learning. The educator also demonstrated an understanding of her relationships with the families, and how they positioned themselves within those relationships. This knowledge not only provided her with insight into the power dynamics of the relationships that had been established, but it also provided some insight as to where she and the FYS educator might need to position themselves if they were hoping to forge partnerships and access family expertise.

The interaction that took place during this first stage of the project was crucial in that it did not dismiss the families' involvement in supporting their children's mathematical learning. Nor did it dismiss the notion of the educators and families coming together. Instead the PTS educator was able to share her previous experience of working with the families to communicate to the FYS educator their strengths and capacities.

After this communication took place, the FYS educator was responsive to the PTS educators communications and proposed that she *would like to know what sort of things they [the children and families] do at home.* She also agreed with the PTS educator and expressed that she too believed that *parents have got a lot to offer.* Deslandes (2001) suggests that educator perceptions and attitudes influence their interactions with families and, through this, the types of partnerships that can be forged. At this stage of the project, both educators had indicated that their work would be enhanced through coming together with families but, more importantly, they both expressed a perception that the families in the PTS setting had something valuable to offer.

14.5.3 Team Meeting 2

By the time the second team meeting was scheduled, both educators had been working with one another toward meeting the brief that they had been given. During this meeting the PTS educator explained, *I've found that the project has been a really*

good way to talk [to families] about some of the things they do at home. When asked how this was being achieved the FYS educator elaborated, *just mentioning what we've seen their kids doing and asking whether they've noticed it at home, or whether they do similar things at home.*

This communication provided some insight into how the educators were initially coming together with families to support the mathematics learning of children making the transition to school. Rather than directly asking the families questions, the educators were sharing information from their own observations and asking families for advice and clarification. Such an approach not only took into account what had previously been communicated by families (their preference to not be actively involved in the work of the teachers), but it also repositioned families as experts on their children's mathematical learning by providing them with a non-confronting space to offer and share information.

By the time of the second meeting, both educators were working closely together. While the families at this site were not working within the same close proximity as the educators were to one another, it was evident that they too were contributing to the work that was taking place, and that a partnership was beginning to emerge. The FYS educator provided some further insight into this emergence of partnership in one of her diary entries where she explained an interaction that she had with a child's father:

> Today I spoke to one of the parents about maths. We were just talking about the weekend and he told me that on Saturday he watched the football and then went outside and drew stripes up and down the driveway with his child. My ears pricked! A pattern! It started a long discussion about mathematical learning! I told him that football is great for maths. We talked about the scoring, reading numbers, the multiples of 6 and all of the player stats that pop up on the screen. He seemed so amazed that he was teaching his child maths by watching the football. I also told him that patterns are the foundation of mathematics so when he made a pattern with his child on the driveway he was actually setting some really strong mathematical foundations. He told me that he left school in year 7 and that he didn't really think that he could help his child with maths. This made me sad but it also made me feel good about what we had shared.

Such insight provided evidence that the interactions that were taking place with families were not simply focused on obtaining information to meet the brief that was provided. The interaction described provided evidence that both educator and parent were actively focusing on enhancing the mathematical learning of the child, and supporting mathematical learning into the future. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) define this particular type of interaction as engaging relationally. They suggest that both parents and educators benefit from engaging relationally with one another, and that the learning of children can be supported through and because of such engagement.

Engaging relationally was a notion that was also reflected in the PTS educator's diary where she described her thoughts and feelings about what was emerging at Site 1:

> I am really happy to be working with Valerie. The parents love her and she is just so good with them. They have warmed to her much quicker than they warmed to me. I think that she

has a natural way with them. She just knows people and people trust her. They are sharing all kinds of things with her and I'm really glad they feel so relaxed because they put a lot of pressure on themselves to do the right thing. I am learning a lot also. She is a gun when it comes to numeracy so I do not think that any of these children will have any problems next year.

This kind of engagement provided the adults in the lives of young children with various opportunities to move beyond the task at hand (developing a plan), and toward working in partnership with one another to better understand and support the mathematical learning of children. It was through such engagement that partnership emerged.

14.5.4 Team Meeting 3

The third team meeting took place in the weeks before the end of the school year. One of the purposes of this meeting was to gain some understanding of the plan that was devised and how it came into fruition. During this meeting the educators were asked to describe their own roles, and the roles in families in the development of the plan. The PTS educator explained, *no one really had a role or had certain things that they needed to do, we just sort of all shared information. We just all worked together, it just all came together.* The FYS educator explained this further by adding, *[w]e shared information but we also talked things over with each other, and got each other's opinions on some of the things we were thinking about or were puzzled about.*

According to Kaiser and Trent-Stainbrook (2010, p.288), 'partnerships are mutually supportive interactions between families and professionals that focus on meeting the needs of children and families with competence, commitment, positive communication and trust' In team meeting 3 it was evident that such mutually supportive interactions had been achieved through the sharing of information:

> [w]e shared information but we also talked things over with each other, and got each other's opinions on some of the things we were thinking about or were puzzled

but also through a responsiveness and receptiveness of the families' needs by the educators:

> some of the parents told us that they were worried that their children couldn't write the numbers, so one of the table activities [that were planned to support the children] involved number cards and [the children] writing the numerals off the cards.

The description of the work that was provided by the PTS educator: *we just all worked together, it just all came together* was also a representation of what is defined by Kaiser and Trent-Stainbrook (2010) as partnership.

By the third team meeting, the educators had formulated their plan to support the mathematical learning of children and were asked to think further about and describe what they perceived as the families' role in the development of the plan. The PTS

educator answered, *they actually had a lot of input because we used all the information they shared with us.* When asked to provide an example she explained:

> well…I've been counting how many children are at school each day, you know how many boys and how many girls. We've both had feedback from parents that their kids love this, and have started counting different groups of things at home, so we thought that we'd start off each session [of the transition to school sessions] by doing the same thing.

The FYS educator explained further, *in a way we've sort of tried to keep it all the same, the materials, everything.* When asked if they thought that working this way would support the mathematics learning of children as they make the move to school the FYS educator answered, *I think it's going to make a huge difference.*

The information offered by both educators highlighted the mutuality between families and educators, and also the level of trust that had been built through the interactions that took place. The responsiveness of the educators to the needs of families, and the incorporation of information that was shared during interactions reflected what Kaiser and Trent-Stainbrook (2010, p. 288), define as 'mutually supportive interactions between families and professionals that focus on meeting the needs of children and families with competence, commitment, positive communication and trust'.

14.5.5 Final Team Meeting

The final team meeting at Site 1 took place after the children had made the move to school. This meeting was designed to provide the educators with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences within the project, and also to reflect on the plan that had been created. During this meeting the educators were asked to describe how they would explain to their colleagues the best way to work with each other (across the two contexts), and families, to support the mathematical learning of children. The FYS educator explained that she would suggest that, *[y]ou have to be out there talking to one another, and spending time together whenever you get the chance.* The PTS educator shared this sentiment but added, *[y]ou have to really believe [families have] got something to offer. And it's the same with the primary school. You have to believe that you've got something to offer them, and that you can learn something too.*

These final comments provided further insight into their work with families and each other, and suggested that while ongoing communication and interaction was an important component of their work, that the belief that everyone had something to share and contribute was also an important consideration. The belief held by each of the educators that families had something valuable to contribute (regardless of how this contribution was made), provided the foundation for the family-educator partnership to come into fruition. That families had chosen to remain on the periphery was not considered a problem to be addressed or an issue that would impact on working together.

14.6   Partnering in the Periphery

The development of the plan that was devised at Site 1 involved seeking out similarity across the different contexts in which children live and learn. More specifically, it involved determining similarities in the practices that sit around mathematics and then bringing these practices together in the context of starting school. While the plan itself is important and has the potential to influence the mathematical understandings of children, just as important was the processes whereby adult came together to focus on building continuity across different contexts.

The partnership that emerged at Site 1 was unique. It followed no set formula, and there was no measure of the effectiveness of working together (apart from individual reflection on the experience). There were no specific or prescribed strategies or skills that could be employed by the educators, and there was no way to gauge what strategies might be more or less effective than those they were using "on-the-run" as the work was unfolding. The families and educators at Site 1 did not have prescribed roles to enact, nor did they share the work equally. Despite such omissions, a partnership that focused on supporting the mathematical learning of young children as they made the move to school emerged.

The partnership that unfolded was borne out of educators' perceptions that everyone involved in the lives of young children had something valuable to offer. More importantly, it stemmed from the notion that everyone could contribute to the process of supporting children's learning in their own unique ways. In this partnership, the families' choice to remain at the periphery of the work did not pose any significant issue for the educators, despite both educators communicating and recognising that family contribution to their work was important.

An important aspect of the partnership that emerged was the opportunity for both educators to draw on their own professional expertise to work with people. Developing such expertise is a significant component of teacher education programs, and also an educator's everyday work, but it is an area that is often only recognised by the profession through leadership initiatives (Darling-Hammond et al. 2007). As a result, prescribed ways of working with people are frequently imposed on educators, or put forward as the "correct" ways to engage with people. Such practice has the potential to restrict possibilities, and to position those involved in partnership work in specific ways. It also runs the risk of setting people up for failure if they do not have the capacity or opportunity to engage in ways that are expected or "correct".

There are some limitations to the study reported on in this chapter. However, these limitations provide windows for future research opportunities. For example, the families' decision to remain on the periphery and to not be actively involved in the research project eliminated the possibility of collecting data on the personal experiences of families. Research that highlights the experiences of families who chose to work with educators this way may provide better understanding into the perceived effectiveness of this form of partnership. Likewise, the affordances to children when adults work together this way, opens opportunities for future research.

Identifying and building on the professional expertise of educators in engaging with people is also an important consideration, and one that demands attention in future family-educator partnership research. The educators involved in the partnership were instrumental in coming together with families to forge partnership, and were creative in how they established and maintained this work. Had the educators adopted a model of partnership as their frame from which to work (Epstein 2011) this might have restricted this process and shaped what transpired in different ways. More research is needed that compares the different ways adults come together, including the effectiveness of different approaches.

In this partnership, educator perspectives were an important component of the developing partnership. Both educators held a sense of perspective that families could provide valuable insight into the mathematical learning of children, and therefore actively sort out this contribution. This is an important notion and one that demands further attention in the research literature.

The development of educator expertise in engaging relationally with families might also be an area for future research. At site 1, both educators engaged with families in ways that were unconventional within traditional models of partnership. This engagement involved moving beyond specific roles or tasks to perform, toward coming together to focus on the learning of children. Documenting less conventional ways of educators and families working together might provide additional insight into the skills and expertise that educators need to engage relationally and, in turn, provide new directions in which educators and families might come together.

14.7   Conclusion

While there are limitations in relation to family perceptions of the experience of working this way, this project demonstrates that families can choose to remain on the periphery of partnership activity, but still work together with educators to support their children's learning. In this project, this involved developing a plan that focused on supporting the continuity of practice across different contexts. Although families were not actively involved in the preparation of this plan, their interactions with educators provided the foundations from which the plan was developed, refined and implemented.

As highlighted in this chapter, partnerships do not have to be equal, nor do the people involved in such work have to follow a prescriptive set of strategies or directions. People are different, and therefore they come together in different ways. When these ways are determined by, and suitable for, the people involved in developing the partnership, they have the potential to be inclusive, rather than only reserved for *some* people – those who can come together in the ways that are expected. This is an important consideration if the adults in *all* children's lives are to be invited to come together with their child's educators to support the learning and development of their children.

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