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notes. The children lived up to or down to these expectations which were not necessarily even made explicit to them.

What Beryl Chalk, my colleague, and I did in a brief three hour workshop with the last five children, a parent of each child and their two teachers had nothing to do with traditional or non-traditional pedagogy or what schools are expected to do, and everything to do with the children as people. How significant adults in their lives viewed them and their capabilities, and opportunities the children had to express what they knew and could do as competent people mattered.

Understanding how children learn and develop social practices such as literacy and numeracy, and the role families play, in other words, the process of “intergenerational family acculturation”, can help us to remove barriers to learning. Allocating children to advantage or disadvantage on the basis of whether they are from middle or working class backgrounds seems absurd in light of intergenerational family acculturation. It is through this form of intensive learning from the earliest moments of life that young children learn how to be in, act on and learn from their world.

My work with children, their families and other adults would seem to indicate the micro and macro differences within and between families within the same class grouping are so diverse that to lump a child into one category or another based on class is another form of oppression which we can clearly do without. The individual child’s needs cannot be truly addressed when she or he is still treated as representative of a group rather than as an individual within the rich cultural and social milieu of the intergenerational family and community.

As a psychologist I was trained to think in terms of pathologies, deficits and behavioural approaches but these did not help me understand how to help people. Using behavioural interventions for most families of young children seemed insensitive to say the least. Not many had the time, energy, inclination or understanding to really succeed.

However, focusing on what was working well seemed to have a profound impact on what happened with those who came to me. I found I no longer needed to see the children. Rather their parents came with a rich narrative in which a child’s life experiences and their concomitant family expectations were embedded. In this narrative also resided the way forward.

Here are some examples of what I mean.

Liam cannot read, will not write, will not listen. He can speak. He will tell you what he thinks of you and whatever he has been asked to read or write. Christine thinks everything is funny but her peers are not amused by her. She does not “do” reading and writing. She draws tiny pictures hoping no-one will see them. Casey sits staring into the distance and plays with her pencil. She says she is thinking. She shows no interest in reading and writing and is easily distracted.

I followed these children’s learning and literacy development from when they started kindergarten at age five until the end of Year 2 during which time they turned eight years of age. With their parents I explored their intergenerational family history over three to five generations including their families’ whole of life experiences and responses to life events and circumstances.

Stephen is in a rush. This frustrates his mother who cannot read what he writes. Jody has so many ideas she never knows where to start writing. Michael is very immature. He finds it very hard to be clear about what he has to do or what he is going to do. Chris is also immature, shy and spells phonetically. He masks shyness by being very active. Marie sees everything, yet sees nothing. Her spelling is poor because she sees the whole word but is not interested or able to work out when she has spelled a word incorrectly. These children’s teachers and parents are concerned about their literacy development.

## “ Understanding how children learn and develop social practices such as literacy and numeracy, and the role families play, in other words, the process of ‘intergenerational family acculturation’, can help us to remove barriers to learning ”

These children are eight years old.

Now read on ...

Liam did not think his reading was valid because he could not read university textbooks. Like everyone in his family he hid his sense of vulnerability behind academic scientific prowess. He worked hard at deflecting attention from what he saw as his weakness. Christine could not read or write or speak because she did not know how to without using her very well developed sense of humour, which went unappreciated by her peers. She chose not to participate rather than be rejected. After all, she had been given her family’s most prized role: the “wag”, the family jester. Casey liked to learn in secret and only show her learning when she was sure she had it perfect. As an only child on show at all times, perfection had been vital to her mother’s sense of wellbeing. Now this was Casey’s lot. So Casey worked hard at distracting attention from her “imperfect” learning.

These family patterns were carried into the classroom and framed how the students were learning. Yes, Liam, Christine and Casey were learning, not according to most literacy theories, but according to their families’ understanding of how the world works.

The last five children, their parents and teachers took part in activities such as musical chairs and Masterminding, a home-made adaption of the colour-codebreaking boardgame, Mastermind. The latter involved inductive and deductive reasoning to demonstrate how to pay attention to parts of the whole as well as the whole. This was followed by a narrative recording of the process (each child wrote about how the game had been played and their adult partner helped them minimally and only when they really got stuck) and storyboarding (the adult partner drew what the child told them about the process). Musical chairs became Musical Thinking. When the music stopped everyone wrote and/or drew what they were thinking at the time. The activities were designed specifically to explore families’ guiding principles about how to be in, act on and learn from the world in a powerful, non-judgemental way.

Parents saw how other children were, how they acted on and learned from their experiences and students how other adults were, how they acted on and learned from their experiences. Musical thinking helped Jody (and her teacher) stop thinking and write, Marie to locate parts of the whole and Stephen to recognise process as important. Masterminding helped Stephen’s mother appreciate that his different way of doing things was okay. Chris and Michael became Masterminding “experts” and consequently class “leaders” overnight and were no longer “immature” in their mind or actions nor in their parents’ or teachers’ perceptions. Jody’s mother realised she was not the only one who thinks “differently” and is now “going to do something with her life”. Marie’s mother is no longer anxious about her daughter’s literacy. Stephen’s mother now really appreciates what teachers do. The teachers now see learning and literacy, their students and themselves in new and exciting ways, too.

Traditional approaches to these children’s perceived

“learning difficulties” would have been to remediate their “deficits”/“delays” by more of the same that they found so difficult without addressing the underlying understandings and perceptions of themselves, their parents or their teachers which were supporting their way of being, acting on and learning from their experiences in the world. Six months after the workshop the children’s literacy had continued to improve in line with their sense of self-esteem and burgeoning confidence. All with pleasure and no pain whatsoever.

This approach came out of my work as a psychologist and educator working with children and adults across a range of issues not only those raised in education settings. It seems to me that this approach empowers all children, their parents and their teachers to reach new and exciting possibilities using their very own gifts and abilities. Such potential can be easily overlooked in our focus on where we and our children are falling short. Let’s celebrate our diverseness that is the essence of our humanity, not tear our children apart for our inadequacies.

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