Report on Experiences of Establishing Professional Partnership With Families and Communities

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Abstract

Childcare centers and early education settings are crucial for a child's initial socialization into a diverse world, fostering partnerships among educators, parents, and the community to support children's development. The Monash Caulfield Childcare Centre (MCCC) exemplifies a successful model of these partnerships, emphasizing family engagement, cultural diversity, and high-quality care. MCCC's approach is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, shifting from deficit-based to strength-based, family-focused interventions. The center's success is evident in its "Exceeding" ratings across the National Quality Framework, supported by its theoretical grounding, qualified educators, and effective administration. Challenges in cultural understanding and communication are addressed through professional development and community involvement. The report evaluates the effectiveness of these partnerships and suggests future research should consider additional factors like gender, age, migrant status, and community involvement to enhance professional partnerships in early childhood education.

Key words: Childcare center; High-quality care; Community involvement; Professional partnerships; Verbal communication; Language use; Expression of language

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General information

Childcare centers and early education settings often represent a child's first step into a more diverse social world. These environments foster new partnerships among educators, parents, and the wider community while also enabling children to form friendships and build connections (Murray & Harrison, 2013). Within these settings, professional partnerships are established among families, educators, and support professionals to ensure that every child receives holistic and comprehensive support. When educators and parents collaborate effectively, they share common values and goals, communicate respectfully and openly, and engage in joint decision-making to address the increasingly diverse needs of children (DEEWR, 2009; Flottman et al., 2011).

A review of the history of professional partnership development reveals that early experimental studies in childhood intervention date back to the 1940s through the 1970s. These studies primarily focused on guiding parents to provide complementary experiences for children with disabilities and developmental delays, or on directly assisting such children to mitigate the effects of disabilities or adverse environmental conditions (Brambring et al., 1996; Dunst, 2013). However, until the 1980s, many early childhood activities still operated under the assumption that deficiencies resided in the child, their parents, or their environment, and proposed remedial solutions (Dunst & Trivette, 2009).

This approach was challenged by experts such as Bronfenbrenner (1974), who argued that the success of such programs depended on supporting parents, who would, in turn, promote their children's development. More than 30 years ago, a significant shift occurred—from deficit-based, child-centered early intervention programs to strength-based, family-focused early intervention programs. This transformation was guided

by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the complex layers of contextual influences on young children (Dunst & Trivette, 2009).

Increasing attention has since been given to the role of families in professional partnerships, recognizing their crucial impact on children's cognitive and behavioural self-regulation, academic performance, and literacy and numeracy skills (Beining, 2011; Walsh et al., 2014).

1.2 The Case Study Introduction: Monash Caulfield Childcare Centre

Monash Caulfield Childcare Centre (MCCC) is a nonprofit, community-based early childhood education center that provides care and education for the children of Monash University students and staff, as well as members of the local community. Sponsored and supported by Monash University, MCCC caters to children from birth to school age. Operating for over 30 years, the centre is registered with the Department of Education & Training as a 50-place Long Day Care Centre.

The center is divided into three age-specific rooms, named collaboratively by the children, educators, parent representatives, and an Aboriginal Elder from the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. Notably, MCCC has achieved "Exceeding" ratings across all seven areas of the National Quality Framework for Rating and Assessment, underscoring its exceptional performance in children's education and care services.

MCCC prioritizes excellence in both staffing and care. The centre operates above the required educator-to-child ratio and exceeds the minimum staff qualification standards. Its team of experienced and highly qualified educators emphasizes continuity of care, building strong relationships with children and families to foster familiarity and consistency.

Parents and families at MCCC come from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds. Some are Monash University students or staff, while others are residents of the local community. Families of enrolled children elect the Committee of Management annually, which includes positions such as president, grievance officer, treasurer, secretary, and general members (MCCC, 2018). This voluntary committee assists with the centre's operations, such as addressing grievances, overseeing business matters, and ensuring surplus funds are reinvested into the centre.

Collaborative partnerships with families are integral to MCCC's philosophy. The centre acknowledges the unique needs of each child and family, dedicating time and effort to ensure everyone feels comfortable and supported (MCCC, 2018). Educators and families share a common philosophy, which includes the following principles:

- MCCC is a community shaped by multiple voices and perspectives.

- Stewardship of the social and natural world is encouraged.

- Nurture and care form the foundation of emotional, social, and intellectual development.

- Positive exploration of each individual's voice is supported.

- The child-parent-educator relationship is central to MCCC's values (MCCC, 2018).

These partnerships are built on mutual respect, trust, and open, transparent communication. Reciprocity plays a crucial role, allowing families and educators to work together effectively. However, challenges in partnerships are inevitable. Stakeholders must acknowledge and respect differences in cultural and lifestyle values. Additionally, some children may have special requirements, such as dietary or medical needs, necessitating additional support from educators.

This report will provide an overview of collaborative partnerships at MCCC, describing the main approaches and the rationale for establishing and implementing professional partnerships from both school and family perspectives. It will then evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches, addressing challenges and proposing possible solutions.

2. APPROACHES USED IN ESTABLISHING AND IMPLEMENTING PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

School engagement and family engagement are the two key pillars of collaborative partnerships at MCCC. This section will discuss the components and rationale of these approaches from both school and family perspectives.

2.1 School Engagement

Several elements contribute to collaborative partnerships with families at MCCC, including theoretical support, highly qualified educators, and effective administration.

2.1.1 Theoretical Support

The foundation of MCCC's approach lies in robust theoretical support. The centre's educational curriculum is guided by the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)* and the *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*—*Being, Belonging, Becoming*. These frameworks support early childhood professionals in collaborating with families to enhance children's learning and development, embracing the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Victorian community, and recognizing multiple approaches to child-rearing (Victoria & Department of Education and Training, 2016).

VEYLDF outlines eight interrelated practice principles, four of which are highly relevant to establishing professional partnerships with families and communities. These frameworks emphasize the primary role of families in influencing children's learning and development. MCCC aligns with these principles by

recognizing and valuing parents, caregivers, and families. Additionally, these frameworks acknowledge Aboriginal people as the traditional owners of the land and emphasize the harmonious development of the natural environment and human life.

MCCC's shared philosophy with parents includes fostering relationships with First Nations people and encouraging a sense of stewardship—rather than ownership—over the social and natural environments that children interact with (MCCC, 2018). The centre's approach is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model, which acknowledges that a child is influenced by various layers of their environment, including social, environmental, political, and economic contexts. At the centre of this model, each child is active, unique, and engaged in their learning and development, shaped by their family, culture, and experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Policies, frameworks, and philosophies form part of the exosystem, indirectly influencing children while interacting with elements in the microsystem.

2.1.2 Highly Qualified Educators

The second key component is MCCC's team of highly qualified educators. All staff exceed minimum qualification requirements, with some holding professional degrees and others possessing up to 20 years of experience, such as Rukmini Raham, who serves as the director of a community long day care service (Early Childhood Australia, 2018). All educators are trained in first aid, allergy management, and asthma care.

As part of their commitment to lifelong learning, staff regularly attend training and professional development programs, and many pursue advanced qualifications. Each educator maintains a consistent shift schedule, fostering familiarity and predictability for families and children. This consistency enables educators to establish daily rituals with children, gathering information about their home lives and cultural backgrounds, which helps children feel valued and supports their adjustment to the centre's routines.

Educators also communicate regularly with parents about their child's performance at the centre, creating a positive feedback loop that strengthens connections with families. Within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model, educators belong to the microsystem, directly engaging with children in face-to-face environments. Emotional attachment, as emphasized by Bronfenbrenner (1979), is a critical factor in children's development. MCCC fosters secure attachments between children and educators by assigning specific staff members to individual children, enhancing emotional bonds and providing a stable support system.

2.1.3 Effective Administration

The third component is effective administration. MCCC has established robust management systems encompassing various aspects of childcare, such as education program progress, sign-in and sign-out procedures, incident and illness records, grievance handling, custodial access, and late collection policies.

These systems support all families and children registered at the centre, fostering a welcoming community, building trust, and enhancing communication through both online and offline methods. Traditional offline approaches include formal meetings between parents and educators, arranged at mutually convenient times to discuss children's development or aspects of the educational program. Additionally, the centre leverages an online platform to distribute newsletters, providing updates on parenting issues, programs, outings, and new initiatives (MCCC, 2018).

In Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model, administration operates within the mesosystem, which reflects the alignment and interaction between two settings in the microsystem (Grace et al., 2013). MCCC's diverse communication methods increase accessibility and ensure alignment between school and family values. Electronic record-keeping, such as individual child development plans, further supports seamless transitions for children between home and the centre, improving learning outcomes (Walsh et al., 2014).

3. FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Family plays a pivotal role in establishing professional partnerships. This section discusses how the parent committee and the information exchange mechanism contribute to fostering collaborative partnerships at MCCC.

3.1 Parent Committee

The parent committee is an integral part of MCCC's organization. Its role is clearly outlined in the *Family Handbook of MCCC*. As a non-profit organization, MCCC holds annual elections for its committee of management, which is responsible for overseeing the centre's operations. For instance, employees and families are notified in advance of any changes to the centre's policies and procedures. All reviews and updates to the policy and procedures manual are handled by the approved Supplier Monitoring and Control Committee, in consultation with the Quality Working Group, management, employees, and families (MCCC, 2018). Furthermore, the parent committee actively participates in handling complaints and grievances.

Research highlights the value of parental involvement in education, viewing parents as valuable resources (Dearing et al., 2015). The parent committee serves as an effective mechanism for enabling and empowering families to engage in decision-making processes. When families and educators form a genuine partnership, it

reinforces the belief that families are central to a child's life, making it imperative for parents to contribute to decision-making (Rouse, 2012).

Adopting family-centered practices as a model for partnership (Dunst, 2013; Dunst & Trivette, 2009), the committee allows parents to recognize the systemic impact their involvement has. The *Family Handbook* details the responsibilities of both the school and families, particularly in addressing complaints and grievances. A six-step procedure outlined in the handbook empowers families to actively participate in decisions affecting their children. This process involves responsibilities such as discussing issues with staff and cooperating with requests to provide relevant information.

3.2 Information Exchange Mechanism

MCCC has implemented an effective information exchange mechanism to foster collaboration between families and the centre. At the outset, staff conduct an orientation survey to understand families' goals and aspirations for their children, enabling the centre to align its educational programs with family expectations. Teachers also encourage parents to contribute learning stories, allowing families to play an active role in shaping the educational program.

To facilitate peer support among families, MCCC has introduced a program that connects families with others who are more experienced, providing a platform for sharing insights and fostering mutual understanding (Early Childhood Australia, 2018). This initiative helps families feel supported by peers who understand their unique challenges and experiences.

In Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model, both family and school are part of the microsystem, directly interacting with and influencing each other. If the values and routines of the school and family environments differ significantly, children may resist attending school (Grace et al., 2013). Conversely, when these environments align, children are more likely to enjoy their experiences at the childcare centre.

To build this alignment, MCCC staff provide families with tangible symbols of belonging and connection to the centre, such as lockers and pigeonholes (Early Childhood Australia, 2018). These small yet meaningful gestures enhance families' sense of connection and belonging to the service. Such initiatives reflect the mutual interaction and support between the school and family environments, contributing to a cohesive partnership that benefits the child.

4. EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS

Subjective expressions of the effectiveness of collaborative partnerships can be one-sided and must be measured using valid and objective methods.

4.1 Effectiveness of School Engagement

The effectiveness of MCCC's collaborative partnerships can be evaluated using the *National Quality Standard (NQS)*, which emphasizes building collaborative relationships with families as a foundation for achieving high-quality outcomes for children. The NQS highlights community partnerships based on active collaboration, consultation, and communication (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2017).

-Standard 1: Respectful and Supportive Relationships with Families

MCCC's comprehensive and flexible orientation processes are designed to meet families' needs. The center provides families with full access to physical spaces, as well as information and resources to support their engagement. Families are encouraged to clarify their concerns and expectations during the enrollment and orientation process. These efforts foster a welcoming and caring environment where families and children can develop a sense of belonging to the community.

Additionally, families are actively involved in the service and contribute to decision-making processes, such as through the parent committee. Recognizing the family as a core unit of intervention, MCCC ensures that parents are treated as equal partners in decisions affecting their children (Rouse, 2012).

Standard 2: Support for Families in Their Parenting Role

MCCC gathers valuable information about families' expectations and goals through orientation surveys and the electronic program *StoryPark*. This platform provides a sustainable and engaging package to support children's learning and development. Educators also collect data from families and children to inform and enhance the educational program, and all stakeholders have real-time access to children's records online. These practices reflect the centre's respect for families' values and beliefs about child-rearing while promoting transparency and collaboration.

Standard 3: Collaboration with Other Organizations

MCCC's educational program aligns with national curriculum frameworks, emphasizing professional partnerships between educators, families, and support professionals to maximize each child's potential (DEEWR, 2009). The staff engage in ongoing professional development, such as training on asthma management, developmental delays, and psychological support. These reflective practices enhance their understanding and delivery of high-quality education programs.

The Code of Ethics (Early Childhood Australia, 2021) also serves as a reference for evaluating the effectiveness of school engagement. The principles of the code guide ethical responsibilities, such as promoting democratic, fair, and inclusive practices. For example, MCCC's

commitment to inclusivity ensures that all children and adults are treated equitably and respectfully, regardless of their background, gender, culture, or family structure (MCCC, 2018).

4.2 Effectiveness of Family Engagement

The effectiveness of family engagement can be assessed using three criteria: quality, quantity, and stability, as proposed by Murray and Harrison (2013).

Quality is a crucial predictor of successful professional partnerships. Research shows that children in higher-quality educational programs exhibit better language and social skills (Murray & Harrison, 2013). MCCC's rating of "Exceeding" in all seven NQS areas reflects its dedication to high-quality care. The centre employs systematic processes for continuous improvement through critical reflection and self-review, while families are encouraged to provide feedback informally or formally at any time.

Quantity refers to the time and effort families dedicate to child-rearing. MCCC recognizes the challenges parents face in balancing work and parenting responsibilities, aligning with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which identifies time as a critical element of the *Chronosystem*.

Stability considers the consistency of childcare arrangements over time. This factor is influenced by the affordability of childcare options for parents. MCCC supports families by offering a funded kindergarten program, including fee subsidies for eligible families, which has benefited many families and children.

Further evaluations of collaborative partnerships can involve gathering feedback from all stakeholders. Regular interviews, questionnaires, and satisfaction surveys with teachers, parents, and professionals can help measure the success of these partnerships and identify areas for improvement.

5. CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Despite the progress made, challenges remain in fostering collaborative partnerships with families.

5.1 Addressing Differences

MCCC operates in a multicultural society, where both families and educators come from diverse backgrounds. A lack of cultural understanding can unintentionally lead to families feeling unsupported and hesitant to engage in the partnership (Crea et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2010). Navigating differences in cultural and lifestyle values is a key challenge. To build culturally sensitive partnerships, participants must first acknowledge these differences. MCCC has addressed this by fostering a welcoming environment and ensuring that representatives of the center reflect the community it serves (Early Childhood Australia, 2018). Recognizing that everyone grows up

with unique values and lifestyles, the center leverages its diverse team of educators to resolve conflicts and cultivate empathy.

5.2 Providing Additional Support

Educators often need to discuss important issues directly with families, but some may lack the confidence to approach these conversations (Early Childhood Australia, 2018). To address this, professional development training and support are essential. Training helps educators develop crucial communication skills to address topics ranging from child feeding to special care needs. Additionally, professionals such as psychologists, social workers, and volunteers play an integral role in strengthening the connection between families and the center.

5.3 The Language Communication skills

Good verbal communication fosters trust and cooperation between people, and helps resolve conflicts and misunderstandings. Through the use of language, the distance between home and school is shortened and a close relationship is formed. The use of language promotes the development of an individual's thinking and cognition. Through the expression of language, people can organize and present their own thoughts and opinions clearly, and then promote the deepening of thinking. Clear and respectful communication is fundamental to establishing trust, which is essential for successful home-school partnerships. Furthermore，in diverse communities, good communication skills help understand and respect different cultural backgrounds, promoting an inclusive educational environment.

6. CONCLUSION

MCCC's successful collaborative partnership model demonstrates the importance of involving all stakeholders—children, families, educators, and the community—in a shared philosophy of cooperation.

First, empathy, respect, and open-mindedness are fundamental in building trust among stakeholders. Effective partnerships in a multicultural setting require participants to adopt a shared philosophy and consider perspectives beyond their own values and beliefs.

Second, MCCC provides multiple channels for communication between parents and the center, such as daily rituals and online newsletters. These alternative methods ensure accessibility and strengthen the bond between families and the community.

Third, flexible management and measurable evaluation criteria enhance the efficiency of these partnerships. By optimizing resource distribution and relying on theoretical foundations, the center ensures that professional partnership principles guide its practices effectively.

Although challenges are inevitable, several strategies

can improve professional partnerships. Educators should seize every opportunity to engage with families, fostering a sense of belonging and value for both children and their families (MCCC, 2018). Professional development should be a continuous process throughout an educator's career, enabling them to adapt to evolving external environments. Furthermore, reflective practices are essential at every stage of the educational process. These practices involve recognizing biases, assessing inequities, and using self-reflection to drive professional growth and improvement (Department of Education and Training, Victoria, 2016).

For future research, additional factors—such as gender, age, migrant and refugee status, and community involvement—should be integrated into the professional partnership framework. Understanding how these variables interact may reveal new challenges, such as language barriers for new immigrants. In such cases, involving social workers or interpreters can facilitate effective communication.

Ultimately, strong professional partnerships benefit all stakeholders, fostering a learning community committed to continuous quality improvement and lifelong learning for everyone involved.

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