# Parents and children in a leadership role in early childhood: Discussing and adding to learning assemblages

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*Te Whāriki,* the early childhood curriculum in New Zealand, positions the parent and child as leaders in the teaching-learning process (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996). This position is supported by socio-cultural pedagogy, which sees learning as taking place in context of the child's family and expanded through relationships with other adults, children and the environment (Duncan, Te One, Dewe & Te Punga-Jurgens, 2012; Smith, 2013). Parents and whānau, often see the teacher as the expert however and may consequently be unaware of their prominent role in their child's early education (Whyte, 2016). This creates a dynamic in which the teachers are taking sole responsibility for the teaching-learning process. Meanwhile children are co-constructing story-threads by creating and re-creating spaces of learning on their own account (Scanlan, 2016). Parents pick up on these threads and will contribute their and their child's ideas to curriculum planning if this takes place before the learning story is written by the teacher (Whyte, 2010; 2016). Hence obtaining a 'parent-with-a-child-voice' before the learning story strengthens the parent's position and sees the parent and their child together in the role of initiators of learning. In this article the potential for learning that opens up with parents and children in a leadership role is explored, drawing on combined insights from two master's theses (Scanlan; 2016; Whyte, 2016).

## Creating 'space' for children and parents as leaders in curriculum planning

When embracing children and parents as leaders, education moves away from a binary approach that sticks the child and the adult in opposing roles of provider and receiver (Olsson, 2009). *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) promotes the child as a "competent and confident learner" (p. 9), however the question is who is planning the next step in children's learning? What is really the involvement of the child and their parent? In order to truly accept children and parents' leadership, teachers are encouraged to reflect on their pedagogical perspectives and practices. One of the current practices is to make the learning story extra detailed, including 'what learning happened' and what learning may follow, in order to help parents to then contribute their views to the curriculum planning (MoE, 2004). In reality, parents are unlikely to share any views that are different from the teacher and neither is the child, because of the latter's highly regarded position (Absolum, Flockton, Hattie, Hipkins, & Reid, 2009; Halden, 1991; Whyte; 2016). This concurs with Stuart, Aitken, Gould, and Meade's (2008) finding that the majority of 'parent voices' shared at the end of a learning story is summative. So what may help children and parents to have a bigger impact on planning?

One perspective that may open up opportunities for parents and children in taking a lead in curriculum design and planning, is a pedagogy of 'intra-activity', where interactions are not only seen as taking place between teachers and children and their peers, but interconnections between people and resources in the environment (such as the documentation of the dialogue between children, parents and teachers), are also seen as an active agent (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). In this view learning stories are not just a 'snapshot' in a child's learning journey but a 'platform for discussion' that has the potential for new learning to take off, a place from which new directions can be taken (Rinaldi, 2006).

## Learning unfolding, changing and added to

Children's learning does not occur in linearity but unfolds as rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Just like a botanical rhizome, for example a peppermint plant, which can grow in any direction, so can children's explorations unfold in any direction at any given time. Striations are put in place to give structure to the time and space in which learning occurs. These structures are like a 'lines in the sand'; rules children are expected to follow, time constraints, health and safety aspects, or the rules children themselves make up for their imaginary game. Striations are a necessity as they open up possibilities, time and space that lead to new rhizomatic explorations (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Striated space includes time of rest and routine, for example meal times, story times or sleep times. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) regard a completely smooth space, a space without any restraints or rules as '*Chaos*', and anyone who has ever engaged with children and their learning might agree. Children do need predictability and time for rest, as this provides them with the necessary energy to take on the next adventure in a smooth interval of space and time. Those smooth and striated spaces do not exist separately, but, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) indicate, they only occur in mixtures, which we traverse throughout the day (Holland, 2013).

An example of the rhizomatic character of children's play can be seen when one imagines a traditional early childhood classroom with a family corner, a block corner, an art area, a library corner and so on. Children may be playing in the family corner, setting out on a 'trip to the park' and therefore walk past the block corner. Something in the block corner might catch their eye and thus makes them stop and see the block corner as a building site on their way to the park. Children already in the block corner might pick up on the idea of a building site, thus change their current engagement. Children who might have been working in the art area may hear the conversation about the building site in the block corner and decide to paint a picture of a digger, which could be observed by a child on the way to the sand pit outside, who then might look for a digger to play with.

## 'Planning for learning' as unfolding, changing and added to

Seeing learning as unfolding in rhizomatic ways would mean that planning learning outcomes for children could have a narrowing effect on what children could explore and thus learn, as even the best thought-out plan cannot take into account how children are going to interact with the resources provided or how they may interact with one another in a particular situation (Scanlan, 2016). However, to think that this means that teacher and parents can be mere bystanders is not correct. On the contrary, this way of working with children expects that teachers and parents can be present 'in the moment' with children and engage in the 'here and now', without steering the children's explorations into a particular direction. When children take leadership of their own learning, their learning becomes more meaningful as their explorations are guided by their current interest, the environment and people within it (MoE, 1996). Children are affected by their surroundings and live and learn in assemblages (Scanlan, 2016). Assemblages can be understood as a collection, made from many different elements, which are "constantly subject to transformation" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 82). Sellers (2013) extends on this notion and refers to assemblage as a multiplicity, which is continuously rearranging and therefore a-centred.

## Assemblages of learning

So what might an assemblage look like in practice? Imagine a group of children finding some soft toys in the home-corner. They quietly put a teddy to bed discussing the bedtime with each other when a teacher doing some music and dance grabs their attention. They look at each other, wake up the teddy and at once merge with the music line. The children in the music line change to butterflies and one of our group of children offers a flower. Full circle they go, coming out at the other end by the library corner. A long book is lying open on the ground. It has a crocodile in it! One of the girls gives a yell, which is a cue for the others to drop teddy into the crocodile's mouth. The 'group as one' folds the book around the teddy: it swallows it up whole. Another child

walks passed and, glancing at the scene, picks up on the cue, unfolds the book and wrestles the teddy off the crocodile. The girls exchange a glance, smile, seize their teddy and run back to the home corner (Matapo & Whyte, 2013).

Where does the adult fit into this example of children taking leadership in their learning and what about the role of the teacher as a facilitator or guide of children's learning and explorations? Cole (2011, p. 5) encourages teachers to be acutely aware of "commonplace assumptions and habitual ways of doing things", as normative teaching practices are limiting children's potentialities as well as preventing rhizomatic explorations. Just by being present the teacher or parent contributes to the assemblage, as well as every question the teacher or parent might ask a child, any resource and suggestions add to the assemblage and might continue children's rhizomatic explorations in new directions. Scanlan's (2016) research suggests that where teachers are engaged and prepared to work in an assemblage *with* children, the curriculum becomes richer as every little detail could find its place on centre stage and add to where the children's learning is going.

## *Children and parents' agency*

To promote the child and parents' agency during the teaching-learning process, and to keep learning meaningful and authentic, it is important that the teacher is cautious not to direct the focus of the learning. Authentic documentation of learning assemblages like the examples above is difficult because the themes seem to change and merge frequently with stories unfolding in an 'additive' way (Sellers, 2013). What stands out for the child in a particular 'assemblage of learning'? The learning story, once written, will often answer that question from a teacher's perspective. Once written this will become the 'learning that happened' and the child will ask their parent to read and re-read the teacher's words. The 'parent voice' the teacher asked the parent to contribute unfortunately often ends up not adding any new information (Stuart et al., 2008; Whyte, 2016). Also, during a busy day it is difficult for the teacher to pick up on the 'child's voice' as there are few opportunities for dialogue and inter-subjectivity.

## *The learning story as an assemblage starting with a parent and child's voice*

The 'Initiating Parent Voice', developed by Whyte (2010; 2016) is a purposeful conversation between the parent and their child about the learning interest or 'learning assemblage' *before* a learning story is written. During this conversation the parent documents (some of) their child's voice, plus how this links to home-experiences. The parent and the child are essentially initiators of a dialogue around the interest noticed and photographed by the teacher. The documentation of this dialogue between the parent and the child is seen as an active agent which contributes to the learning in rhizomatic ways: it may continue and expand the learning interest or veer away from it, adding to the learning assemblage of the child. The learning interest may expand in different ways, morph into something else, connecting to learning at the early childhood centre and home in creative, 'additive' ways (Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Sellers, 2013). The collective activity between the parent and the child talking about the photo of the child's learning interest, works as an 'active agent' through which the learning expands and the parent gains new insights while listening to the child's voice (Lektorsky,2009; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). This has the potential to develop into a 'primary dyad', which can be understood as interactions between two people who are closely connected, carrying over from one context (the child's home environment) to another (the early childhood centre). Such dyads are formed over time by the 'joint activity' between the parent and the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and can be a powerful motivating force for learning as the conversation remains alive for the child across contexts: at home and at the centre. One might argue that the rhizomatic approach to children's learning contradicts the more linear structure of 'Initiating Parent Voice'. However, as children are encouraged to share their own thoughts, the 'Initiating Parent Voice' places a strong emphasis on children as leaders of their own learning. Therefore, the tension between rhizome and structure is eased and reflects the nomadic transversion between the smooth and striated.

The research on the 'Initiating Parent Voice'(IPV) carried out from 2014 to 2015, took place in five early childhood centres with 15 parents, with parents using the IPV up to twice a month for six months (Whyte, 2016). The photo of the child's interest used for the 'Initiating Parent Voice' had the most 'intra-active' value when the photo was more recent and showing a significant interest of the child. Parents were surprised how much their child was able to tell them about their learning at the centre, including their child's imagination and awareness of the activities in the centre. The child was also able to tell their parent about the daily routines, which was a significant change from the child not being able to tell their parent about their day at the centre prior to the research (Whyte, 2016). McGuigan and Salmon (2004) affirm that the child becomes more aware of their learning when they are talking about an event in their own words, emphasising what specific aspects are most important to them. Over the course of the research by Whyte (2016) parents became increasingly aware of their child's interest. They started to ask more open-ended questions and used 'wait-time' to listen to their child's voice.

*"It was interesting to listen to **his** perspective".* NikauP4

The 'Initiating Parent Voice' increased the parents' involvement in their child's learning because the interpretation of their child's learning interest was left open to the child and the parent. The 'Initiating Parent Voice' helped expand the dialogue about the learning, including further engagement with the learning at home (Whyte, 2016). This could subsequently be included in the learning story, which becomes a documentation of an assemblage of learning. This assemblage can contain initiatives of the child as well as the parent, as shown in the following examples by Whyte(2016).
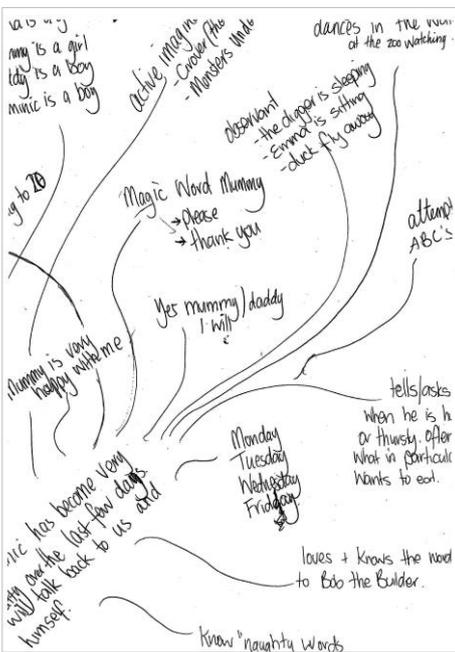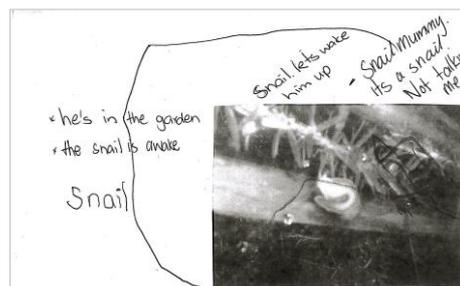
**Example one**



*Image 1*



*Image 2 and 3*

In this example, a two-year old boy tells his parents about his interest in hammering. Upon learning about this interest (D: "Banging, banging nails, go hammer, hammer", the child said, image 1), mum and dad made him an outdoor 'hammer and nails' block to add to his collection of tools at home. Mum and dad enjoyed documenting their child's voice so much that they continued recording their child's voice at home (image 2 and 3; RimuP2.2).

### Example two

In another centre taking part in Whyte's (2016) research, two Chinese parents recorded their child's voice in their own language, which was a great opportunity as neither parent or her child spoke English.



The translation reads:

*Mum:* "Wow A., could you tell me what you are doing in these two pictures?"

*A, with smile:* "I am climbing the ladder, Mum. I am very good at climbing because I climb very fast."

*Mum:* "Oh really? My sweetheart, you are awesome. But aren't you scared because the ladder is so high?"

*A. shook her head:* "No No. I am four years old and I am a big girl. Also teachers stood beside me."

*Mum:* "I don't know what I could say to A now because she was never scared of heights. I worried about one day A. would fall down from a high point without my attention. When A. was little, she already liked climbing chairs, tables and cupboards. She was very fast. Sometimes when I noticed it, she has already climbed to a high point and looked at me with a beautiful smile. I think my baby must be the monkey from the last generation."

From this moment onwards the parents took the little girl to the school playground with her older brother. After the research the father reported they continued using photos as a starter point for their conversations with their children (MataiP1.2).

### Example three

A further example in this research project was when one mother co-constructed a marble-roll at home with her child, after her child talked about the marble roll activity shown in her photo (Whyte, 2016). Gradually parents started to identify links to their child's interest to what was happening around them, for example, one parent talked about the diggers and building projects in the community to her child who had shown an interest in building. Ninety percent of parents experienced an increase in communication with their child. Many parents indicated they enjoyed the focused, detailed conversation with their child in the 'here and now' and became more aware of their child's interests.

*"You know the photos… and … not every day but twice a month you can clearly see what is his interest ... because he always focus on these few things and he will be like: Mummy I really like these engines… and I like the 'hand-work', like building things. He is happy to go to the rail society like somewhere they have the construction team of people working there and like building things and he will standing there and watch and I will explain to him like all the diggers… the bulldozers… like not on a picture, not in the book… but for real."*
MataiP3.2

*"He enjoyed telling me about … what he was doing in the pictures yeah… it gave us that time that we don't usually spend together… so that was pretty good. I guess I do spend time… but we just focussed on something that was just 'me and him', so that was really nice… it was … different".* RimuP4.2

The timing of the 'Initiating Parent Voice' (before the learning story is written) leaves room for new ideas and sharing of information that is important to the child. Hunt (2016) trialed the Initiating Parent Voice (re-named 'learning snapshot') in her kindergarten and reported an 80% return rate of the 'Parent Voice'. Parents became less dependent on the teachers to tell them what their child was learning at the kindergarten as the child started to share more about their learning and their day in general (Hunt, 2016). Writing the learning story after the 'Child-and Parent-Voice' also enables the teacher to acknowledge the parent's and child's contribution. Consequently, parents become a more active part of the teaching-learning process, which spans from the home environment to the centre and beyond in rhizomatic ways, adding to the assemblage of learning. As Wenger (1998; 2010) has pointed out, equal participation in a Learning Community depends on the extent each member's contribution is taken up and reified (validated) by the teachers who are in a position of power. Real participation is only realised when all parties are deeply interested and engaged in the joint activity (Dewey, cited in Biesta, 2013). Before this can happen, both parents and children need to have the opportunity to collaborate in the planning for learning and take a lead in it. A parent commented:

*"When you talk to your children then you got to ask them more specifics, rather than 'What did you do today?'… because they did so much… "* NikauP2.1

## *Conclusion*

This article has explored the rhizomatic ways in which children's learning takes place and how teachers and parents can enter the learning assemblage with the child through dialogue. By dialoging about their learning, children not only revisit their learning but also add information that is currently meaningful to them. This added information supports teachers and parents in understanding the child's interests in more depth and allows them to facilitate opportunities for the child's learning, which can then further unfold and morph into new directions. Together, parents and children not only identify links between the learning interest and experiences from home but also contribute to the learning assemblage in divergent ways.

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