Understanding the families you work with: Reflective questions to uncover cultural differences

In order to understand how to be culturally responsive to each family that attends your setting, you first need to identify their cultural practices and values, especially where these are different to your own. The information and questions provided here are intended to increase your understanding of the range of beliefs, practices, and values across families, and provoke your reflection on how you might interpret what you observe with families.

Each family must be considered unique. Even within the same cultural group, individuals and families vary in their beliefs and practices and in their adherence to social conventions of their cultural group. Some families may also be influenced by multiple cultures, where parents are from different cultural backgrounds themselves.

Keep the following questions in mind as you engage in formal and informal conversations with families, observe their interactions with their children, and make home visits in order to develop understandings of the families you work with. Be aware that families with high levels of cultural respect for teachers and a desire to avoid any perception of challenging the authority of the teacher may be more likely to voice their values, aspirations, and perspectives within small group discussions with families from a similar cultural background.

How does this family communicate, and gather and interpret information?

Some families might prefer formal strategies such as meetings to discuss family activities, routines, communications styles, expectations for independence, and educational goals. Other families might prefer informal conversation. In addition, questioning techniques may vary between communities: some families are uncomfortable with direct questioning and may prefer opportunities to sit with you and share stories as a way of gathering and passing on information.

What to observe:

Families will have different communication styles, and demonstrate different levels of assertiveness versus introversion. Some families may use humour regularly in interactions. Others may expect children to be quiet as a sign of respect, or not participate until they understand what is expected of them. You might also note the preference of some families for direct instructions rather than open requests (as in 'sit at the table' rather than 'would you like to sit there?'). Overlapping speech may be viewed in some families as demonstrating attentiveness to the conversation, but considered disruptive and disrespectful by others. Non-verbal communication such as nods and smiles may be preferred as a way of acknowledging children rather than spoken praise. With families that speak a language other than English, note patterns of eye contact and use of tone of voice.

Practices such as calling teachers 'aunty' or 'teacher' refer to the ways in which some communities value the identification of relationships as important, in comparison to the use of names which mark people as individuals. The use of names, however, can be very important to other cultures for cementing friendship and belonging.

Ask families about:

- how children and adults show respect

- how they prefer to pass on information – verbally, or through written or technological means

Alternatively, don't ask, but offer information about yourself and the centre as an invitation for them to offer information about themselves.

Does this family like to stand out or fit in?

In some cultures, being shy, quiet, and reticent is valued. Self-restraint and control of emotional expressions are seen as a sign of maturity, and asserting oneself as a sign of immaturity. In other cultures, children who are outgoing and eager to explore new situations are viewed positively compared to children who do not seek out or actively participate in situations.

What to observe:

Children may wait to be invited or directed to an activity, or they might be loud and demand attention, and take leadership of activities and other children. Some children and families might be uncomfortable when singled out for acknowledgement for something positive they have done. Families may also be reluctant to speak out for fear of being disrespectful.

Ask families about:

- their expectations for children's behaviour while in the setting

How does this family view the sharing of responsibility with children? Are children expected to be dependent or independent?

A distinction is sometimes made between 'individualist' and 'collectivist' cultures. Individualist cultures focus on the individual and emphasise independence, while in collectivist cultures, interdependence is valued and contributing to the family is more important than expressing oneself. Dependence and accepting help is encouraged, and indirect communication or reading the needs of the group without being told is favoured. In contrast, being independent is viewed as selfish and as rejecting the family. Children are not expected or encouraged to make decisions, but rather decisions are made by parents who understand what the family or group needs. Developmental expectations for children to manage their own toileting, eating, and sleeping may also vary considerably for families where dependence is valued. When interdependence is valued, parents will feed young children rather than give them the opportunity to feed themselves. Parents may also see it as their responsibility to dress children.

What to observe:

The practices of finger-feeding and using sippy cups may be unfamiliar to some children, and they may lack skills to dress themselves. Children may also struggle within free play environments, as their previous experience may have been of being directed or making decisions alongside a family member rather than free choice and independence.

Ask families about:

- who helps the child with care activities at home

- which family tasks the child contributes to and how

What kinds of characteristics and dispositions do families value?

At a broad level, families and teachers from different cultural groups are likely to have more shared values than different values, such as valuing education, achievement and hard work, for example.

Individualist cultures value independence, self-expression, self-reliance, direct and open communication, and the development of unique skills and achievements. On the other hand, collectivist cultures, which focus on the group and each person's proper contribution to and place in the group, emphasise interdependence, self-restraint, group harmony, strengthening relationships and maintaining the group. Values that might be important to families influenced by collectivist cultures include kindness, caring, making a contribution and being of service, and families might hold goals for their children to internalise and follow the social norms and rules of the setting. Of course the distinction between individualism and collectivism is not nearly so clear cut, as cultures and families contain elements of both, and the combination also varies by context.

Families may differ in how highly they rate academic achievement. Obedience and compliance might be more important to some families than children developing their individual interests. Families may value modesty and self-improvement, and encourage their children to reflect on and learn from their mistakes. This might include inducing shame in children, or helping them to recognise and feel badly about their failures as a socialisation tool to teach children cultural values.

What to observe:

Children may readily accept choices their parents make for them in regard to their learning activities, or look to adults or the group for guidance and lack skills for making decisions for themselves. Children may be more concerned with looking after and following each other than making independent play choices. They might have a quiet demeanour. Conversely, they might thrive in a free choice play environment, come up with their own plans for play, and be confident to implement them.

Ask families about:

- their expectations and aspirations, their children's interests, their goals for their children, and the ways in which they help their children to achieve these goals

- how they think you might complement their efforts

What kinds of learning methods does this family value?

Whereas notions of child-centred education and free play are firmly entrenched in Western early educational discourse, some families may employ and value alternate learning discourses, such as learning through observation and skills-based learning. Some families will believe that learning occurs through structured teaching and worksheets, and may expect children to be passive recipients of knowledge. These families may focus home learning on serious things such as letters, numbers, drawing and formal musical instruction, particularly as a result of their perception of the lack of academic learning taking place in the early childhood setting, leading to disconnection between learning in the setting and at home. Families may see play and learning as separate, rather than understanding play as a means of learning. Play might be perceived as distracting children from learning tasks.

What to observe:

Families may settle children at more structured activities before leaving them in the setting, for example, at the writing table. Children may enjoy practising writing by copying letters and numbers.

Ask families about:

- what they do to help their children learn

- what happens if children raise questions, and if and how they explore on their own

- their beliefs and attitudes towards play

What kinds of activities are viewed as risky or inappropriate for children?

Water play and risk-taking can be a big concern for many parents. Families might see water and sand play as a health and safety risk, or they may see children being wet and dirty as a form of neglect. Additionally, a concern about water play might be generated by living in countries without an abundance of water where water is not seen as something to play with.

Strategies for learning and finding out about the world are influenced by culture, and it may be only in the dominant Pākehā culture that thinking critically and verbalising ideas are valued; in other cultures these behaviours may be considered inappropriate and offensive.

What to observe:

Families may request that their child not engage in a particular activity, or they may supply particular equipment such as aprons or helmets for specific activities. Children may have difficulty verbalising an opinion or questioning if this is considered inappropriate in their culture.

Ask families about:

- what worries or concerns they might have

- what they value most about the setting

- what they think could be done to make their child or children happier in the setting

- what they think would improve the play, learning, and relationships of children

How does this family view working with teachers?

Families will have diverse expectations of and attitudes towards teachers that may help or hinder efforts to build partnership with parents. Some cultural groups hold high regard for teachers, which means that they do not feel confident to become involved in the early childhood setting, or their respect for and belief in the professional expertise of teachers means that they avoid interfering or intervening in the setting or challenging or expressing disagreement with teachers. When parents consider teachers to have high social status and authority, they may see the notion of partnership with teachers as inappropriate and disrespectful, but they may also show compliance and conform to the expectations of the setting. The early childhood setting might also be seen as a place for children to learn, rather than a community to which families should belong.

What to observe:

Families may have conflicting beliefs about the importance of including culturally appropriate learning practices or home languages in the early childhood setting. Some may not value the use of their own cultural practices in the setting as they desire their children to learn the cultural ways of the dominant group.

What should you do to address tensions regarding families' practices, beliefs and values?

Conflict and tension are possible in situations where your professional or personal views are incompatible with those of the family. Develop an understanding of parents' concerns by listening to them, and also obtain the perspective of teachers or others who have a similar cultural background if possible. Carefully explain your perspective and seek mutually agreeable solutions. For example, where families see children being wet and dirty as a form of neglect, you might respect families' views while also explaining what children are learning through their play with sand and water, and promise to make sure children are promptly changed into clean dry clothes as soon as they have finished. You might share your beliefs about the importance of learning about water or the emotional benefits of water play. You can use learning stories as well as daily conversation to highlight learning areas that are unfamiliar to parents or of concern. Similarly, families are likely to want to support parent partnership in the early childhood setting if the benefits are thoroughly understood.

However, you might need to reflect on how you can adapt your practices to fit alongside those of the family rather than expecting everybody to subscribe to the values of your setting. If your expectations for individual independence are in conflict with families' expectations of interdependence, adjustments in teaching strategies can be made so that opportunities for interdependence are emphasised. For example, as routines for children to get their snack independently may conflict with families' valuing of community and interdependence, these routines might be adapted (by mutual agreement) so that children eat their snack communally at a large table at the same time. Early childhood settings might also identify areas in which minor changes to practice can support cultural responsiveness, for example, renaming 'birthday parties' after understanding that some refugee families hold a different view of the significance of a birthday.

References and further reading

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