Defining meaningfulness: Enabling pre-schoolers to get the most out of parental involvement

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Defining ‘meaningfulness’ - Enabling preschoolers to get the most out of parental involvement

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Certain types of parental involvement are considered by some researchers to be ‘ineffectual’ and ‘meaningless’ -

‘Parental involvement is often shallow, ineffectual, unrewarding and even frustrating to those involved ’ (Briggs & Potter, 1999, p. 433).

‘Asking family members to engage in meaningless tasks such as cutting fruit or covering books’ is ineffectual (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2015, pp. 42-43).
Research question

- How to define ‘meaningfulness’ of parental involvement? (What are elements that constitute meaningfulness of parental involvement in early childhood education?)
Methodology - Grounded Theory

- Grounded theory was defined as ‘the discovery of theory from data’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.1).
- The data collection followed a two-phase process - the initial sampling and theoretical sampling.
- The initial sample included seven teachers and four parents from a childcare, and the theoretical sample included four teachers and five parents from a kindergarten and three parents from a playcentre.
‘Relational approach’ to interviewing - ‘aimed at eliciting narratives of lived experience in a two-person setting’ (Josselson, 2013, p.vii).

A total of 23 interviews (11 teachers, 12 parents) were conducted in October and November 2013.

Each interview lasted for 60 to 80 minutes.
Data analysis - three stage coding

- Open coding - going through the data line by line, attaching codes to the data, and staying open.
- Selective coding - grouping the open codes into categories.
- Theoretical coding - identifying relationships between the categories (Glaser, 1978).
Teacher: ‘Could you describe some of the meaningful moments when you facilitated parental involvement activities?’ The prompts included: ‘What made you facilitate the activity? What were the responses from parents/children? Why do you think the moments were meaningful?’
Parent: ‘Could you describe some of the meaningful moments when you participated in parental involvement activities?’ The prompts included: ‘What made you participate in the activity? What were the responses from teachers/children? Why do you think the moments were meaningful?’ The prompts were used only when the interviewee needed.
Interview questions for theoretical sample

- Apart from the question for the initial sample, three questions addressing the three themes were added: ‘How were the activities practical?’ ‘What made you facilitate/participate in the activities?’ ‘What were the impacts of the activities?’

- Interviewees were also asked to elaborate on selected categories/subcategories.
Findings

Theme 1: Activity of involvement

- Centre-home conferencing
- Home-based involvement
- Centre-based involvement
Centre-home conferencing

- Conversation: ‘The most valuable time I think with parental involvement is when I’m speaking to parents everyday, as they come into the kindergarten, as they come to pick up their children’ (KT1).

- Diary: ‘We have a daily diary we have to do, we take pictures in the morning and write a little story about what’s happening in the afternoon...so if parents do look at them they can see what their children have been doing in the day’ (CT1).

- Poster: ‘We do posters that tell of what has happened in the month with children, and this is where parents can look at too’ (CT1).
Noticeboard: ‘We’ve got a big noticeboard that we write a lot of information up on’ (KT1).

Learning story: ‘I read the ones [learning stories] here, I read them quite often, and I quite like it, because it does show what your child is doing...what they are being up to’ (CP1).

Interview: ‘Twice a year, we invite parents along, we timetable parents in to spend approximately half an hour to talk about their child, what their aspirations are for the child...’ (CT2).
Home-based involvement

- Parenting: Parent meeting the child’s physical needs such as feeding and toileting.

- Toy and play: ‘They like to play out in the garden, we got a trampoline at home, so they come and amuse themselves’ (KP1).

- Book and story: ‘If they want to sit down and read book with me I’ll...they’ll come next to me and they can choose the book to read’ (KP1).

- Number and letter: ‘She learns how to write the letter V because that’s what she started with, and we ask can you draw a little v, she draws the little v...’ (KP4).

- Community: ‘She loves ballet, I’ve taken her to some ballets, she went with Fantasy and we went to see Giselle, Swan Lake, and The Nutcracker’ (KP1).
Centre-based involvement

- **Watch:** ‘Parents will look through windows and fences or you will see them coming to pick up their child, they will look from the distance to see what their child is doing’ (KT1).

- **Share:** ‘We had two parents just live nearby, they are in the music school, and came up one day and did performance up here’ (CT1).

- **Play:** ‘I notice one of the parents when he comes in he has more fun, playing with the things as children do, he is just like a big kid...’ (CT7).
- Parenting: Parent meeting the child’s physical needs which occurred more often in the infants and toddlers group.
- Scaffold: Parent helping the child overcome learning difficulties.
- Housekeep: keep the centre tidy, clean, and properly equipped - ‘My partner fixed one of the...they got all these blue drums for water, rain water, goes into this big blue drum, he just drilled the hole and put the tap on for the kids to turn on and off...’ (KP2).
The above involvement activities were described by participants as positive experiences and established practices. Participants affirmed that these experiences and practices were meaningful. Therefore, the theme activity of involvement constituted one dimension of meaningfulness of parental involvement - practicality. For any parental involvement practice to be considered meaningful, it should be accepted practice, that is, it should be practical.
Theme 2: Dynamics of involvement

- Teacher-driven dynamics
- Parent-driven dynamics
- Child-driven dynamics
Teacher-driven dynamics

- Whanaungatanga: ‘This is a family environment, whanau they are welcome... so whanau involvement to me is being able to come here, being treated as at home, the kindergarten is not a place just for learning, but a place of sharing and being together’ (KT2).

- Open door: a policy aimed at maximising opportunities for involvement and allowed parents to observe the teaching sessions at any time.

- Proactivity: teachers approaching parents proactively and innovatively - ‘They ask individually what we want for our child... in that way parents know we get a say, which is what happens here’ (KP5).
Parent-driven dynamics

- **Aspiration:** ‘I think my duty is setting them up to be a good person that achieves what they are capable of achieving...’ (KP3).
- **Self-efficacy:** ‘I think my involvement is gonna make a huge difference to him’ (CP4).
- **Role construction:** Parents believed that involvement in their child’s education is their role.
Child-driven dynamics

- **Personality:** ‘...my child is quite a shy and quiet child, and I wanted to be there, because for me it’s important for him to feel secure and safe in the surrounding, so if I can I always try to be there to help guide him through something he’s not done before’ (CP4).

- **Disposition:** ‘He likes to talk about it [learning story]. There is a picture of him doing the obstacle-a-thon, so he was able to bring home and show his dad who didn’t go, oh this is what I did there, and he was able to talk about what he did’ (CP3).
Dynamics of involvement motivated, activated and sustained parental involvement, and signified that the involvement practice was desirable, therefore, it constituted another dimension of meaningfulness of parental involvement - desirability.
Theme 3: Impact of involvement

- Impact on child
- Impact on parent
- Impact on teacher
Impact on child

- Emotional wellbeing: ‘When you’re with your children in a playcentre you don’t have separation anxiety, so that’s sort of the safe environment’ (PP1).

- Social development: ‘They do learn social responsibility, they see it, for me, my children see me do the things for the community, not just for my family, it’s about everyone around the surround’ (KP5).

- Learning disposition: ‘I think he has seen his mum talking with us about things he is interested in, interests has a big impact, all of a sudden we’ve taken interests in the things he is interested in’ (CT7).
Impact on parent

- Learning experience: ‘You stay with your child at playcentre session, and that’s part of yourself learning as a parent as well, so rather than coffee group’ (PP1).
- Network: ‘I just have a chat with other parents while we are supervising, talking about your children, about their development, and getting opinions and suggestions’ (PP2).
- Gratification: ‘I have enjoyed that a lot, going to playcentre, playing with her, and playing with lots of stuff...watching the kids grow too is a big thing, I really enjoy being on duty’ (PP3).
Impact on teacher

- **Motivation:** ‘His parents are watching his learning, watching every teacher....what I like the parents is that they started to do that with him first, and their involvement encourages me to support him’ (CT3).

- **Multiple roles:** ‘One young mum we asked her...we talked about her child...and then she started crying...so it’s very delicate sometimes, it’s like you are a social worker, you are a teacher, you are a mum, you are a sister, you are mother figure, you have to know when to put which hat on’ (KT4).
Participants’ descriptions of the positive effects of parental involvement on child, parent, and teacher substantiated a third dimension of meaningfulness – effectuality.
In summary, the data generated a multi-dimensional constructs of ‘meaningfulness’ of parental involvement – practicality (practical practice), desirability (desirable practice), and effectuality (effectual practice). Practicability, desirability and effectuality manifested the meaningfulness of parental involvement, and were optimised when all parties of the teacher-parent-child triad were engaged.
The above figure presented a model incorporating all themes, categories and sub-categories and relationships between them, which illustrated constructs of meaningfulness. The triangular situation of teacher, parent and child set the scene for all other relationships. Situated within the triangle, the large circle represented activity of involvement which contained three categories (home-centre conferencing, centre-based involvement, and home-based involvement) and their sub-categories.
Each of the three straight unfilled arrows (inward) represented one of the three categories of dynamics of involvement (teacher-driven, parent-driven, and child-driven) and their sub-categories (displayed on arrow spine).

Each twisted unfilled arrow (outward) represented one of the three categories of impact of involvement (impact on child, impact on parent, and impact on teacher) and their sub-categories (displayed on arrow head).
Conclusion

To judge whether an involvement activity is meaningful, three questions should be asked: Is it practical? Is it desirable? Is it effectual? If the answers are ‘yes’, then the involvement practice is meaningful.
References:


