

Powerful Partners or Pushy Pests? Positioning Parents in Home/School Literacy Partnerships

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Background

Philosophies in the making

- 7 years & 5 different cohorts pre-service teachers
 - First years: 4 year Bachelor of Education (no time in schools)
 - First years: postgraduate 2 year Bachelor of Teaching (Primary/Secondary) (3 weeks in schools)
 - Second years: postgraduate 2 year Bachelor of Teaching (Primary/Secondary) (approx 15 weeks in schools)
 - Final semester students in an intensive 12 month Bachelor of Teaching (Primary-approx 6 weeks in schools)
 - Canadian cohort undertaking Masters of Teaching (no time in schools)
 - All asked to come up with a way to represent their educational philosophy: hopes and dreams...

Philosophies emphasised

- Valuing kids
- Recognising where they are at
- Making use of technology
- Setting high standards
- Helping kids overcome disadvantage
- Being aware of change
- The need to encourage life long and life wide learning

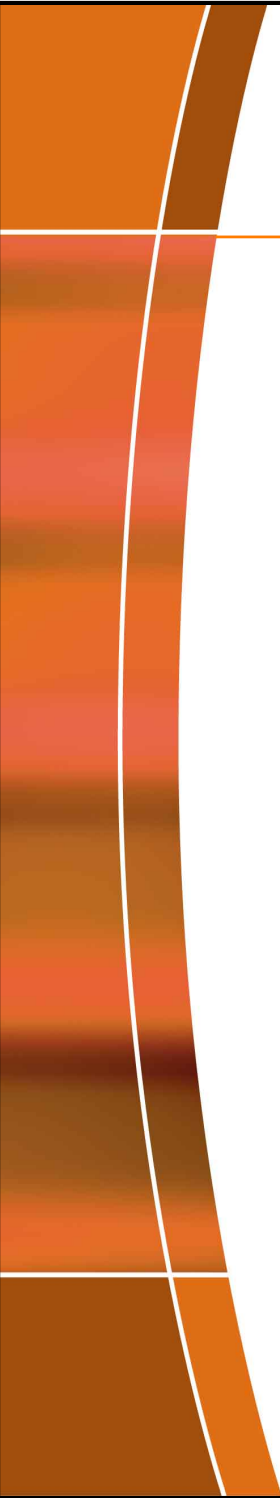
- And the transformative potential of the child/teacher relationship

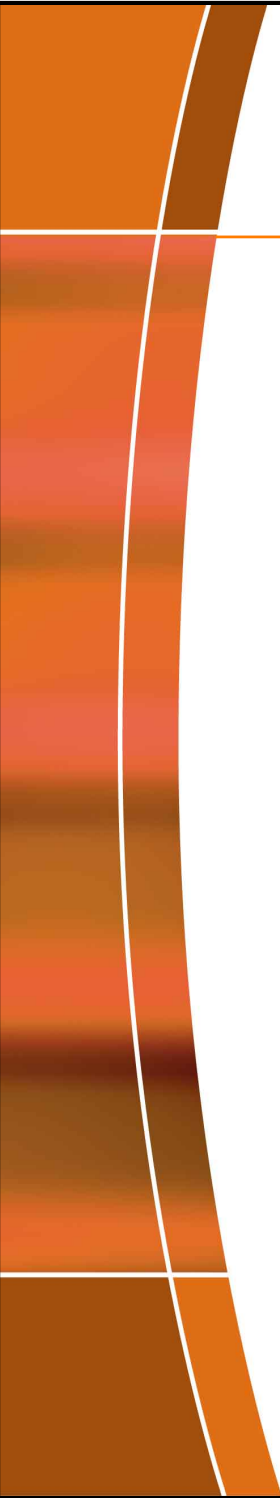
Almost entirely missing?

- Any reference to parents, caregivers and homes

Except...

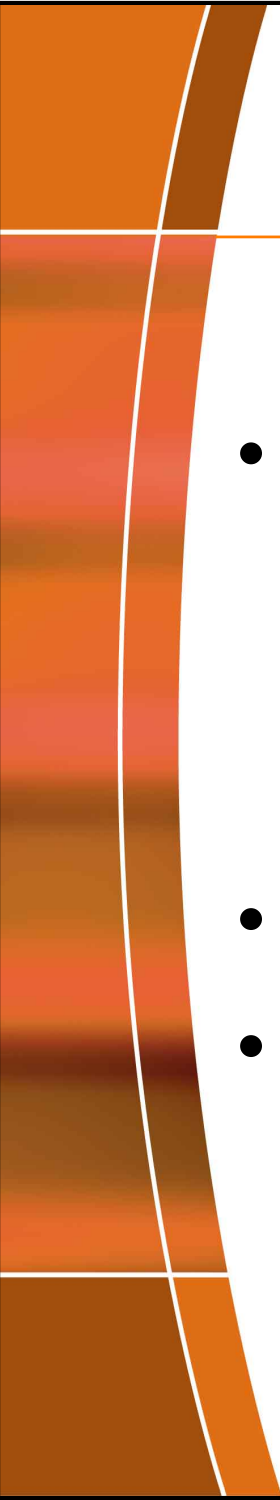
- To signal fear
 - “oh that’s the one thing that terrifies me. Parents. Eek. Kids no problem. Parents; I just think I’ll shut the door and put up a ‘keep out sign”!

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- To anticipate parental compliance
 - “I think parents..their role? Um well probably important in helping reinforce...?; you know, like helping kids see that school is important. Listen to the teacher. Be good...”

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- Or in reference to some part of the kids' background that might need to be 'overcome'
 - “I guess in a lot of cases we'll be the most positive influence on kids lives sort of like substitute parents”
 - “They can't help what they have at home. We have to make up for it”.

Why is it so?

- Law of unintended consequences
 - Defecit model
- Wider social phenomenon
 - Families subjected to intense scrutiny
 - Everyone has an opinion
- *Examples...*

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- Media routinely portrays teachers in two equally dramatic ways:
 - Heroes
 - Villains

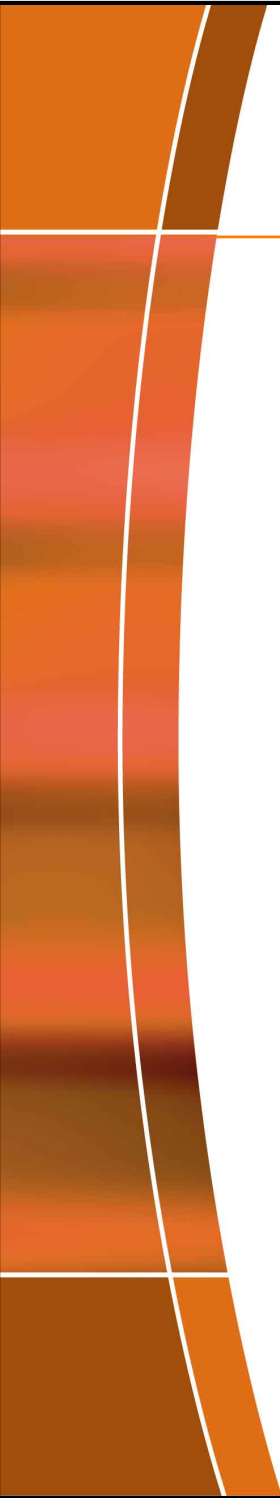


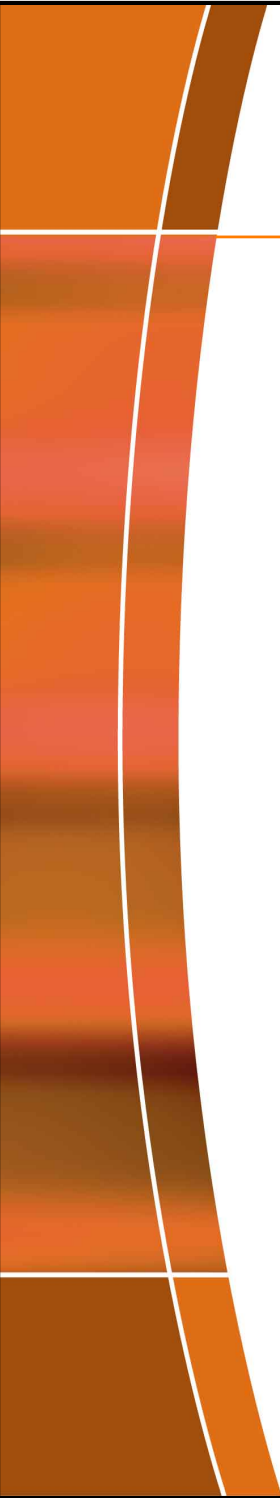
So...

- Parent/Teacher; School/Home partnerships bring together two groups of people under enormous pressure, with tremendous responsibilities and a strong awareness that if they get something wrong everyone will be there to judge them...
- Is it any wonder our pre-service teachers are frightened!

Why we can't ignore it...

- When families are (and feel) involved with children's education:
 - Improved student attitudes and outcomes
 - Improved retention
 - Increased attendance
 - Fewer discipline problems
 - Higher aspirations
 - Improved parental satisfaction

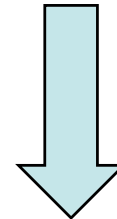
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- Equally large amount of research indicates that how schools and families define involvement can differ significantly!

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- From (pretty much any) school website
 - “Parents play a key role in the learning of their children. Here at School X we are strongly supportive of parental involvement”.
 - From a parent
 - “Oh yes I’ve worked out what parental participation means at this school. Get your kids to school on time in their uniform with their homework done and a lunchbox full of school approved food and all permission notes and fundraising forms appropriately completed. Don’t ask any questions. Go away. Come back on time, park in the designated areas, take the children supervise homework. Do it all again tomorrow. Buy us a present at Christmas...”

Type 1

The parking officer model

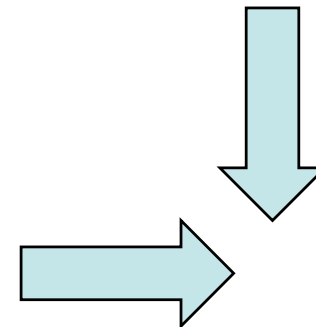
- Goal: compliance
- Communication: one way
 - Rules/regulations/forms/etc etc



Type 2

The 'we know best' Expert model

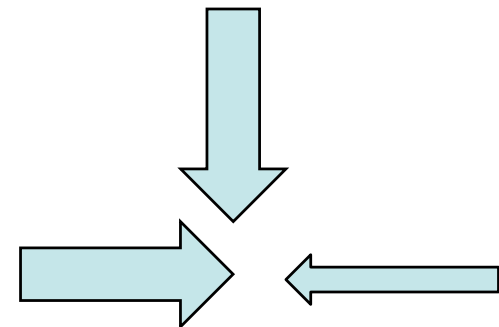
- Goal: Information dissemination
- Communication: one way
 - Who/what/when/where:
 - "this is what's going on"
 - "this is what's good for you"



Type 3

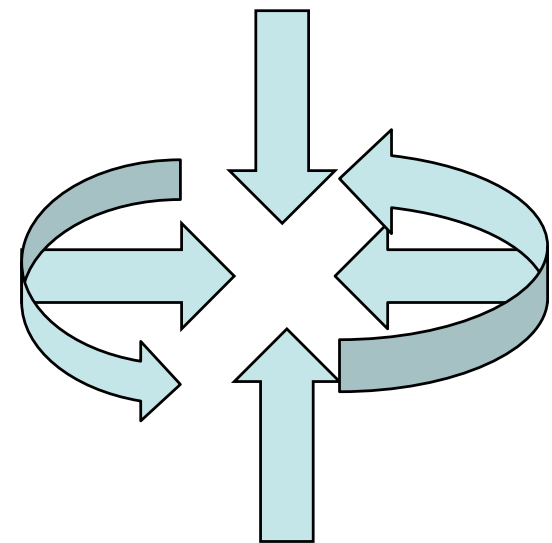
The Census model

- Goal: Information collection
 - Communication: partly two way
 - Who/when/what's going on
 - 'tell us everything so we can make the right decisions'



Type 4

- The Relationship model
- Goal: building partnerships (two way)
 - How/who/what/where/when/**why/Why not**
 - To ensure all parties feel:
 - Included
 - Valued
 - Celebrated
 - Normal



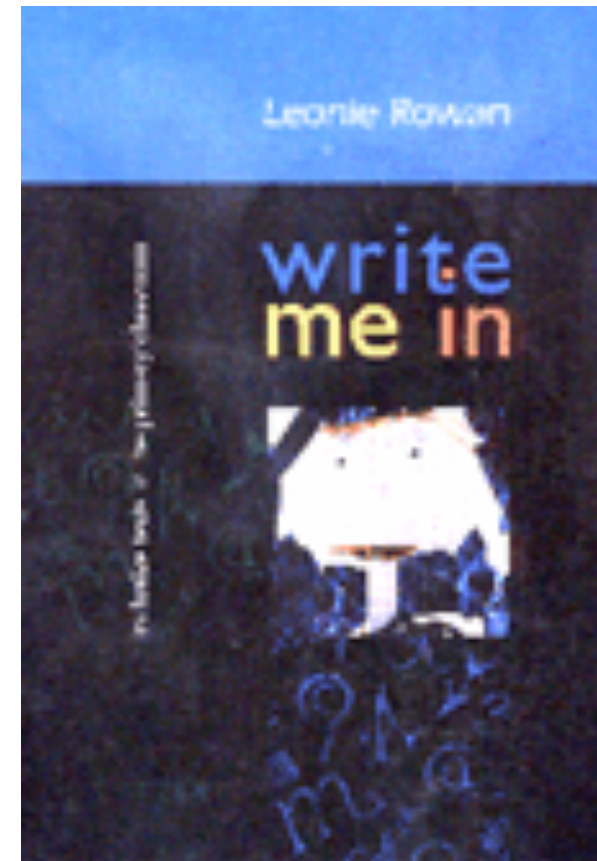
How to move forward

- Building on an awareness that family involvement can improve literacy outcomes and accepting that there are specific skills required for this to happen, in the rest of the session I want to work through the steps we have taken with pre-service teacher for creating positive home/school partnerships: partnerships which go beyond superficial, tokenistic or limiting relationships

Drawing on

- Write Me In:

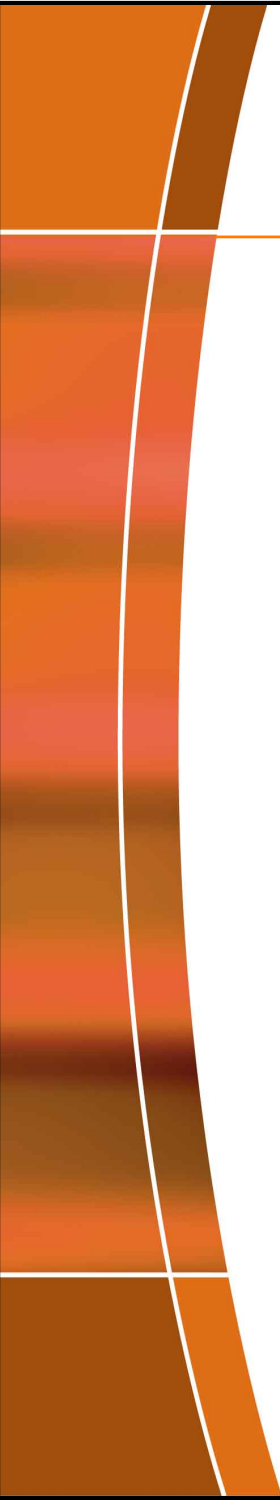
Transformative
Textual Analysis



Step 1

First: improved information

- What do contemporary families actually look like?



Estimates from the ABS suggest that families are diverse

- 70% are couple families
- 9% are in blended or step families
- 18% are lone-mother families
- 3% are lone-father families

– And the group you are part of can change quickly....

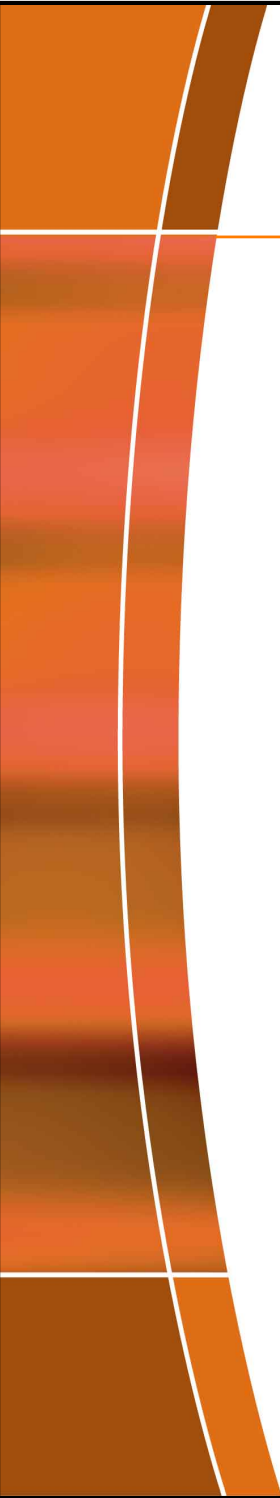
Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009

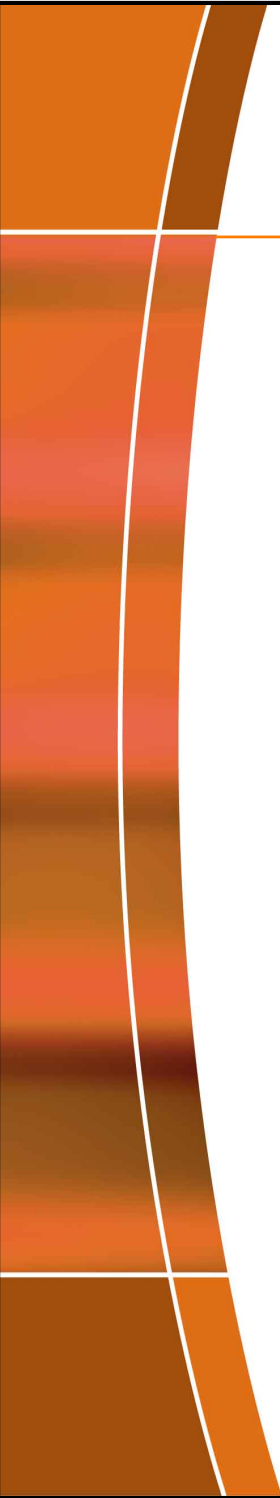
Step 2

- Improved information
 - How do contemporary families live and work?
 - Care by grandparents increasing
 - Time spent working increasing
 - Time spent on housework NOT decreasing
 - Many people (especially women) working 'double shifts'

Step 3

- How do contemporary families feel?
 - People routinely feel stressed, rushed, and pushed for time
 - Single parents particularly vulnerable

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- This kind of information can go some way towards helping us establish productive relationships
 - You might think that having shared all this that students would trend towards empathy
 - This wasn't the case

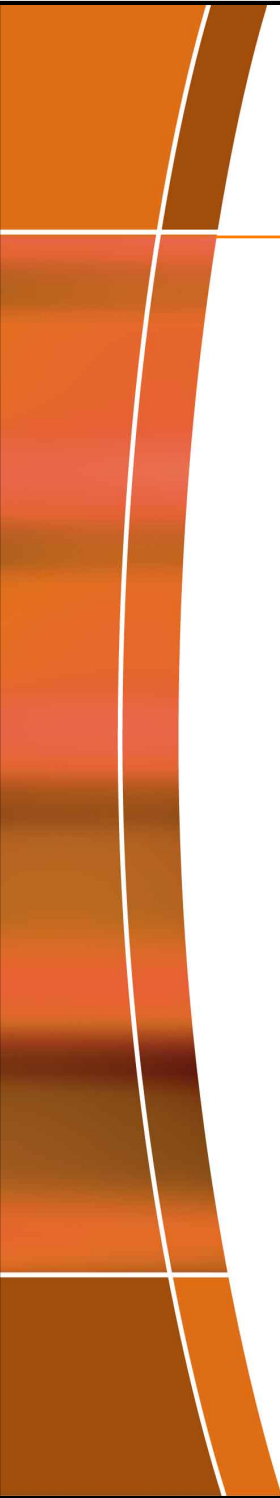
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- “I just felt so sorry for this one little boy who was struggling with reading; in the 2 weeks I was there I don’t think he ever did his homework; it just makes you wonder what goes on in parents’ heads”....

A key point....

- When dealing with attitudes to people in our world, knowledge alone isn't the only thing we need. Knowledge doesn't exist in a vacuum
- Every day, every minute, we receive dozens of messages about our world: and about what is natural, normal and desirable in that world—and if we're not careful those messages come with us in to our day to day activities where we evaluate, judge and pigeon hole others
- This can happen no matter how nice we are, or how much we genuinely value other people

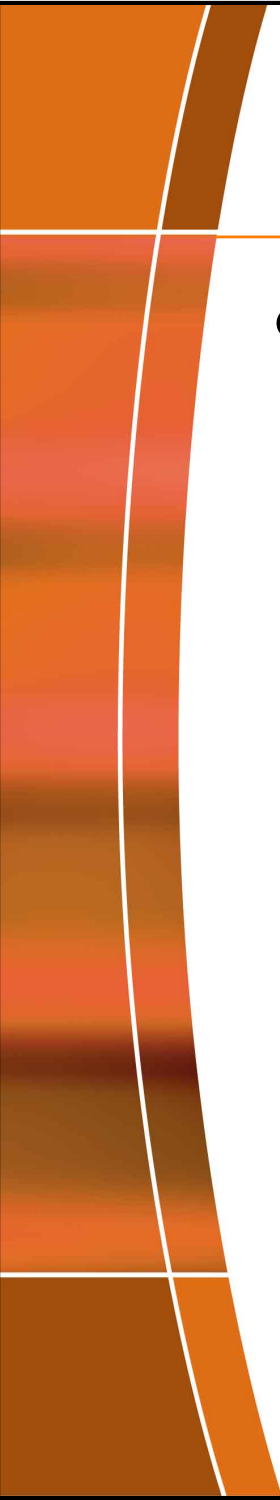
For example

- Tell me the names of some beautiful people
- But if we turn to the resources in the world around us we get fed quite a different set of images

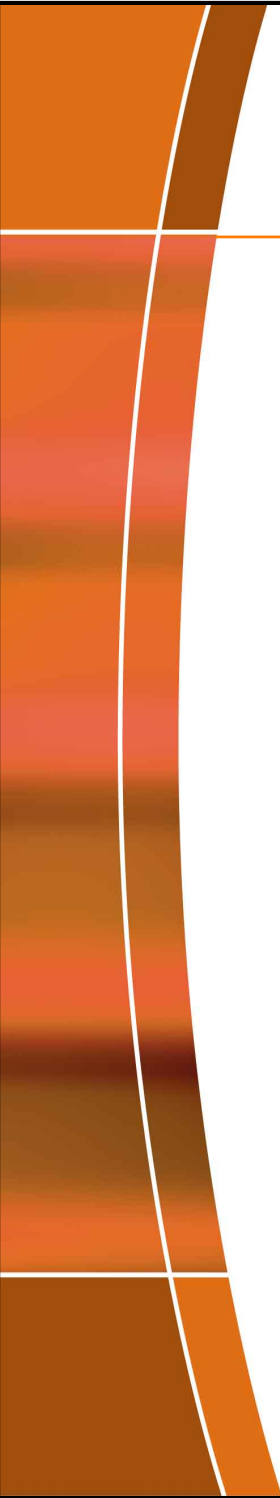
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- In everyday life our own inclusive ideas/beliefs are narrowed down, 'tidied up'—given a make over—and then presented back to us so **confidently** and so **frequently** that they appear natural and normal....this is the process through which **mythical norms** are created

Mythical norms....

- *Somewhere on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows 'that is not me...' this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure. (Audre Lorde, 1988: 282)*

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- There is a mythical norm for every group in our society relating to 'what' they are like and what they should be like
 - Politicians
 - Football players
 - Teachers
 - Families....

Mythical norms govern the combinations of age, gender, cultural background, appearance, ability, disability, religion, sexuality, socio-economics and family structure we expect, value and reward in particular contexts

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- Over the past 30 years the range of images has increased slightly but the expectations regarding family form and function hasn't changed much

The Vital Step: Step 4

- Developing positive, sustainable partnerships with parents requires an ability to identify when we are operating as though the mythical norm is real
- To do this we need skills in transformative textual analysis
- This will allow us to identify the difference between **traditional** stories about families and **transformative** stories about families

Traditional texts

- Traditional texts reproduce narrow versions of 'the truth' about a particular group. Whether old or new, they represent groups in stereotypical and limiting ways

– example

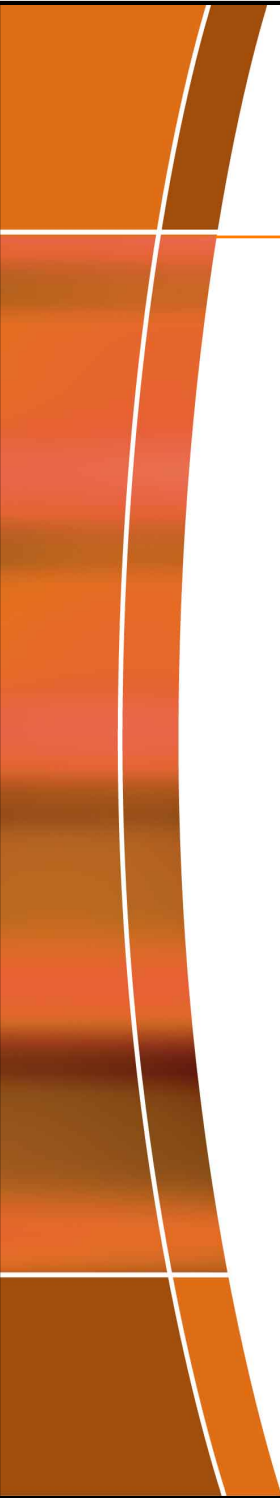
Transformative texts...

- Challenge traditional representations of people or groups
- Challenge stereotypes and mythical norms
- example

Transformative texts...

- Portray differences as natural, desirable and normal

They **value** diversity in gender, age, economics, religion, sexuality, appearance, ability, language and family form

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- It isn't just about appearance
 - How the family should look
 - It is also about expectations
 - How the family should act
 - And relationships
 - How different families are valued
 - How different families are celebrated
 - How different families feel natural, normal
 - This requires attention to assumptions made across all those paradigms of difference: gender, culture, location, economics, religion, sexuality, physical appearance etc etc

Questions to tell the difference

- Who is included or excluded?
- Who/what is valued or devalued?
 - Valued means a number of things:
 - Being seen to belong in a particular context
 - Having access to valued resources (time, attention)
 - Having access to rewards
 - Having choices and sense of control
 - Being safe

The missing link...

- Having worked through all 4 steps we asked our students to reflect upon their own practices and assumptions and to evaluate what they were saying/doing in relation to families/homes/caregivers
- Before we did that we brought in parents to talk to them about exactly what makes them feel valued/normal etc etc

Key messages

- We feel valued when:
 - Listened to
 - Spoken to like adults
 - Given the benefit of the doubt!
 - Given enough time to do things
 - Not expected to be perfect
 - Seen as people doing their best
 - Given information WE want to hear
 - Hear more about our kids than about the tuckshop
 - Get good news stories
 - Aren't always told what we're not doing
 - Aren't just given lectures—allowed to ask questions sometimes

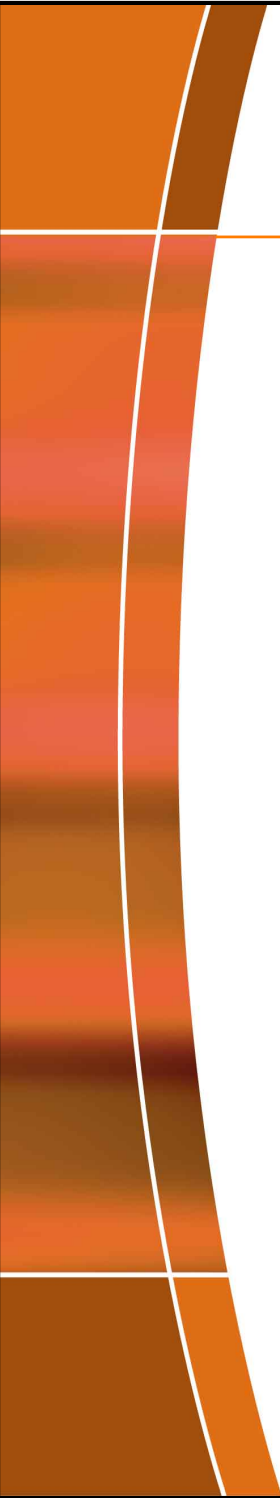


The focus questions

- Who is (and what differences are) included or excluded?
- Who/what is valued or devalued?
 - Who is **celebrated**? Who is criticised?
 - Who gets **rewards**? Who does not?
 - Who has **power**? Who does not?
 - Who/what is shown as **natural**/normal?
 - Who/what is shown as unnatural or 'other'?
- What pattern does the text contribute to?

Student A: power & criticism

- I had a prac during mothers' day and I thought I'd just do something I'd seen in another school: the kind of handprint thing. And then I actually really read it for the first time and thought: gee that is a little condescending: "oh silly mum probably doesn't appreciate how time flies we'd better remind her"...so I changed it and used a different activity instead.

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- "Sometimes you get frustrated because I am so small and always leave my hand prints on the furniture and walls... but everyday I'm growing and will be grown-up one day....and all these little hand prints will surely fade away. So here is one more hand print just so you can recall exactly how my hand looked when I was very small..."



Make heart out of handprint by pointing fingers
down and towards each other.

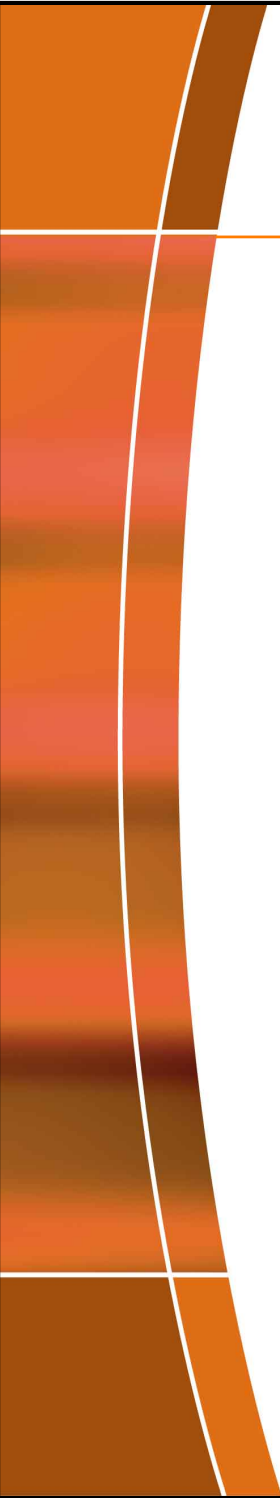
A piece of me I give to you!
I painted the heart to say "I love you"
The heart is you, The hand is me
To show we are friends. The best there can be
I hope you will save it and look back some day
at the heart I made for you on this special day.

Student B: patterns & norms

- I was doing some reading with a group and they were reading this book about going on a camping trip. It was about 'the best thing'. The best things are the stars. The best thing is fishing etc. And the book actually said something like "the best thing in life is having mum and dad with me all the time". This is the book I'm reading with 4 kids; 3 of whom DON'T have mum and dad together.. And sure it's just one book, but what if you hear that all the time?

Students J &K: valuing or devaluing: economics, gender, family form

- I had kind of thought..well to be honest...that the lecture we did on treating parents respectfully was a bit of a waste of time, because...like...we're all adults or whatever. But we had to collect newsletters and notes home and, look (from journal)

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- “This week we begin our major fundraiser: the chocolate drive. Each family has one box of chocolates (worth \$50) to sell. This is vital to our school so your effort is appreciated. Any child who raises more than \$100 will receive a prize at assembly!”
 - “This weekend we have a working bee for Preps – Year 2s. Come along dads and help us re-build our sandpits, and mums, there are lots of windows and tables that need a jolly good clean. Come along and help us out!”
 - “Thursday is our parent information evening where we will provide information about our school year. This is an important night for all of us. We strongly encourage you to attend. As this is a night for parents, we ask that children are not brought along. Thanks!!”

Student D: valued

- “I had this fabulous supervising teacher. I was being all moral about homework and how it seemed strange that kids didn’t all do exactly the same thing. And she said to me “what do you think the purpose of homework is?” and I didn’t know! And she said “for me, it is to encourage parents and kids to share their learning. This boy’s dad has 3 kids and a demanding job and has told me upfront that this term he needs to take some of the pressure of the kids. He spends 60 minutes a day in the car taking the kids to and from school and they listen to books on tape and discuss them. They build vocab and they talk to their dad. And he doesn’t end up resenting me and the school”. She really made me think.

Student E: economics: valuing and including

- “This one teacher..she’s like.. she wanted to involve parents in her classroom—but they didn’t want to be there. Didn’t turn up when invited. The other teachers were..going, what can you expect’?..’oh don’t bother’... So she stopped putting notes in newsletters and started hanging around the school gates just to talk. She didn’t ask anything for ages. And then gradually she invited them in. and they seemed to feel much better about that. And now she has like this total army of people helping”

Finally

- “The most important thing I’ve learnt is to always ask why. Why do I think something? Why am I asking something? Why am I writing something? What do I want to get out of it? And is the way I’m going about it, is that the best way, I mean, will people get what I mean. At the end of it, why should they believe me?”

Three Whys Deep...

- Why am I asking something?
- Why do I believe something?
- Why have I formed my opinions?

Be the change....

- *"I grew up thinking that change was cataclysmic and probably accompanied by music. The way we've done it here is to start slow and work small. At some point, it begins to multiply, and you get transformation -- almost before you realize it."*

Barbara Waugh Hewlett Packard

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- Thanks for listening!
 - Copies of the presentation are available on request: email l.rowan@griffith.edu.au