

The impact of family participation in children's learning processes and community development

Families know children from their first heartbeats. They have a relationship with them from gestation and are the first to identify their way of feeling while faced with different situations, their likes and the way in which they express their emotions and concerns. For this reason, it is essential that the active participation that parents and caregivers have had since the beginning of children's lives does not end once they enter the educational center. Teachers have to recognize families as the children's first educators; understand them as partners in the learning process; and provide spaces for participation so that they can see themselves as fundamental actors in children's learning.

Therefore, it is important for educational centers to open their doors to the families. When families' comments, suggestions and questions are taken into account and when they are invited to be an active part of children's experiences, they understand their role as educators; they develop skills to feel more secure in this role; and they recognize themselves as transforming agents of change in their communities.

A first step is to recognize families from their history, their culture, their traditions and their knowledge, because these affect the daily being and doing of the children and, of course, of the communities they inhabit. To do so, teachers can generate dialogue spaces and experiences that allow them to understand the family composition, its dynamics, parenting processes and their interests and concerns.

With this information, teachers can invite families to share different spaces with children in the educational center, such as classroom experiences, events and celebrations. Thus, through play, cultural manifestations, art languages and dialogues, teachers promote connections and dynamics between families that enhance children's development. These experiences are made visible in the educational center through documentation panels that show the children's productions, their voices and different ways of expressing themselves. These panels also encourage families to get involved in children's experiences, implicitly creating a sense of belonging to the educational center.

These spaces seek to promote co-responsibility in the educational process, and collaborative relationships between adults who accompany children as the basis for the development of social fabric between communities. The connection generated with the families during these moments is of vital importance to enhance self-recognition of their role as educators and at the same time to generate positive interactions and stronger relationships, in the midst of which children's learning comes naturally. When this is achieved, families become important agents, who, through their actions and their own resources, mobilize actions in favor of the transformation of their communities.

In the aeioTU Educational Experience, the daily dialogue between children, families and educators enhances the creation of spaces for the participation of families and communities.

This influences the construction of agreements and decision-making in favor of a childhood culture in the territory where the children live. It also becomes visible in events organized by teachers in order to mobilize the active participation of the families. An example of these events are the open houses, in which families and different members of the community visit the centers to understand the aeioTU Educational Experience. Another example are the Welcome afternoons, in which families meet the teachers and the team that will accompany their children during the school year. There are also especial celebrations (such as the family day, the grandparents day, or the costumes day, among others); which are defined according to the particularities and identities of each center and its community. There is also the literature night, in which a cultural articulator is invited to share stories with children and families through the narrative language, allowing for dialogue, knowledge exchange and a welcoming and pleasant moment for those who participate. Another event is aeioTU at the park, which seeks to promote the meeting between children, families and community through different play stations in nature and the exploration of a diversity of natural materials.

Below we share two examples that show how aeioTU educators and members of the aeioTU Network promote the participation of families as fundamental partners in the children's learning process and the building of social fabric within their community:

At Lomas del Peyé, our team transforms the community

(aeioTU center Lomas del Peyé, Cartagena, Bolívar. Colombia)

The aeioTU center Lomas de Peyé is located in the La María neighborhood, in the city of Cartagena. It opened its doors for the first time on September 7th of 2014, welcoming 508 children, their families, the team and the community in general.

From their arrival into the community, the team of educators developed a strategy with the children to recognize their families and community identity. With the question "Who are we?", they started a process to identify the characteristics of the inhabitants of the center and its surroundings. This search showed them how families that arrived to the neighborhood as consequence of forced displacement in the Bolivar department, especially in the Montes de María, developed a lack of ethnic self-recognition for fear of discrimination. They also disliked the prejudices that have been socially and historically built against the black race, and the implications that being black has in a community where there is violence, violation of rights and high levels of poverty.



"Seño yo quiero ser como la palanquera vende frutas.."
Deimer Morelos: Investigador



This uprooting of their identity was a reality, even though, in the daily life of the children in the center and in the visits carried out by teachers in the community, the team could identify the preservation of several cultural practices from the black community, including hairstyles, everyday customs and narrative practices.

To accompany the community in the strengthening of their cultural identity, the team of educators from the center started an activity inviting the children and their families to rescue the meaning of belonging to an ethnic community. The objective was to give importance to cultural diversity and its transcendental role in the conformation of a society.



Different experiences were developed around this topic, recognizing the children's interests while at the same time allowing them to articulate these interests with their context. For example, children visited the neighborhood closely observing and analyzing their community, and recognizing the characteristics and customs of its inhabitants in their daily life.



Another strategy that was used was to invite different cultural articulators¹ from the community to have a dialogue with children and their families about the

importance of recognizing themselves within an ethnic group. During the meeting they also had the opportunity to understand how to their participation in different activities as a community, could promote the construction of citizenship and sense of belonging. Among the cultural articulators that were invited was Carlos Arturo Reyes (Charles King), a recognized singer of one of the main musical rhythms from the Afro culture, *champeta*. Carlos Arturo shared his vision about cultural diversity and the pride that comes from representing his ethnic group with the children and their families.

With children, the aeioTU Educational Experience became the best way of approaching this sense of identity. Using art and play teachers promoted self-recognition processes allowing children to understand themselves as members of the Afro culture, own their customs and strengthen their sense of belonging to this ethnic group, characteristic of their community, understanding that ethnic diversity reaffirms us as historical, social subjects, full of rights.

¹ Cultural articulators are people that can contribute, from their knowledge, to the enrichment of exploration processes and the children's investigation projects. They participate in different experiences with the children, in the decoration of spaces in the centers or through the participation in events or celebrations. Cultural articulators can come from different areas of knowledge, what is really important is the knowledge they can transmit to the children, educators and families. This knowledge helps us to broaden everybody's learning and to generate a participation environment, where the diversity and richness of the cultures is taken into account and made visible. Some examples of cultural articulators are artists, fishermen, community leaders or weaving grandmothers, among others.

Families as cultural articulators in CorpoAyapel – Member of the aeioTU Network -
(*Virgen del Carmen Service Unit. La Apartada, Córdoba. - Colombia*)

One of the characteristics that inhabitants of La Apartada have, in the Córdoba department in Colombia, is that they resort to different trades and informal jobs to secure their family's livelihood. Some of these inhabitants are part of the families from the children in the early childhood educational center "Virgen del Carmen". This center is a member of *Sharing*, a network of early childhood centers inspired in the aeioTU educational model. Educators from centers that are members of this network receive constant accompaniment and training from the team of trainers in aeioTU.

From the initial recognition teachers did with the families to identify their interests, culture and particularities, it was noticeable that they felt ashamed for having to resort to informal jobs to earn their livelihood; and that they did not recognize the cultural importance that these informal jobs have in their territory.



Thus, teachers invited families to donate an object characteristic of the job or trade that they do in the community in order to be used in the classrooms. Then, during an assembly with their children, each family presented their object, describing its importance in the development of their jobs. Through this dialogue the families started understanding the social and cultural importance of their role within the community.

Educators then invited the families to place their objects in the role-play corner of the classroom to allow their children to play with them. When they started seeing their children interacting with these objects and doing a representation of their jobs through the scenic language and through play; families recognized what these mean to their children and how their jobs maintain a priceless value for their children, their families, their culture and their community.



Thanks to these experiences, families started to get more involved in children's learning processes, sharing their knowledge with them. They also participated in the construction of pedagogical tools, strengthening the identity of the educational center, claiming the richness of their knowledge; and thus consolidating themselves as cultural articulators.

This recognition of themselves as fundamental agents in the children's learning process and the transformation of their community led the families to continue to put into practice their knowledge to respond to the needs of the center. For example, they used elements of from their context to build a sink for children, at their height, promoting healthy habits with more comfort and generating the opportunity to save water.

Thus, the participation of the families in children's learning process and in the construction of a community sense, makes it possible for children and the educational community to come together and build collective knowledge, enjoying their skills, their culture and enriching their identity, which then strengthens the development of children.

