Mary Holwell:

The VEYLDF provides us with the idea that children are at the centre of the ecological model. That they are each unique and engaged in their own learning and development, which is shaped by their individual context of family, culture, and experience.

Mary Holwell:

How important is it to consider each child's context when using the planning cycle?

Karen Hope:

Well, I would say very important. And to answer this question, it probably is worth taking a minute to kind of consider even briefly what we mean by the ecological model. Sometimes people do need a little reminder. It might be something that you've heard of, but you're not quite sure how that actually looks like in a planning cycle. We often associate the ecological model with the theory, and sometimes theories find it hard to make their way into the actual practicalities of designing a programme.

Karen Hope:

The ecological model calls to our attention all of the factors that influence a child's development. You might remember that often it's visually represented by circles. These five systems ranging from the micro little system to the Chrono big world system. It takes into account, and you spoke about this a little earlier, these factors such as environment.

Karen Hope:

So environmental factors, societal factors, political factors, economic factors, and cultural factors. These are all the things that impact on little children's development. And when you consider all those influences, and they can be quite overwhelming when you think about them like that, you start to really appreciate that each child has their own context. A bit like what you were talking about the two examples that you gave, about children and their families and their interests earlier. So that's what the ecological system is really asking you to consider in the planning. What's the context of this child or these children? What's their story?

Karen Hope:

When you think about the context that children live in and the context that they come from, it helps shape the planning cycle, both in the initiation of each learning plan and in the continuation of the learning plan. So there needs to be recognition that families and indeed broader communities that children belong to, are diverse and that they are influential.

Karen Hope:

I think it can be helpful if you think of children as each walking through the door of your early learning centre with funds of knowledge. I really like this idea of funds of knowledge, because we can sometimes make assumptions about children, that they might not have a lot of knowledge when they come in, but indeed they have backpacks, virtual backpacks full of knowledge. And this knowledge, these skills and family and community networks that they have built up, even in a short amount of time for very young children. So babies are coming into your services with funds of knowledge.

Karen Hope:

I think to be able to think about families this way, it requires early childhood professionals to find out about children and their families. Again, this idea of questioning and the noticing comes into play. Who are your families? And who are these children? And making sure that you are taking great steps to find out who they are, because you cannot plan for them, and their learning and their development if you don't know who they are. So this requires you to establish and maintain ongoing relationships and ongoing dialogue. I think it's important to remember that relationships are not a static thing they are constantly changing. So the conversation that you may have had when the family has enrolled and oriented their child into the service, that's not where it finishes. That's your start point. These relationships, this dialogue, needs to be ongoing. What you knew about a child in February would not be the same, I would hope, as what you know about a child and family in September.

Karen Hope:

So the first thing that needs to happen when you are connecting the context to the planning cycle is to ask yourself what strategies do you use to gather information about children and their families? Is it just a questionnaire at the beginning of the year and that's it, or is it a lot of information building, strategies such as phone calls, conversations, parent conferences, all kinds of manners of ways?

Karen Hope:

I think this is a skill set that early childhood professionals are really good at, is working out what best way to engage each family, because what works for one family may not work for another. For all of the many reasons that we talked about in the ecological model there, there are lots of enablers and barriers for families. So what are they in your service and how do you go about finding out? Because when you know the children, then you can plan for them. I think that educators and early childhood professionals, teachers, also need to have a great grasp of the everyday experiences and practices of children and how these can be incorporated into the early learning environment.

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