5 Benefits of Human-Centered Design Thinking for Family Engagement

Global Family Research Project

THE Early Learning Lab

ncfl™ National Center for Families Learning

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Background

A lot has been written lately about the power of human-centered design (HCD) to solve educational challenges and promote innovation and improvement. A cyclical process consisting of three main phases—(1) observing and talking with users to create empathy and understanding, (2) brainstorming new ideas to meet the users' needs, and (3) prototyping and testing new solutions—human-centered design is increasingly being adopted by those in the family engagement field. Enthusiasm for the process is mounting because human-centered design creates a platform for raising up families' voices and perspectives, strengthens relationships and understanding among families, practitioners, and communities, and can lead to more effective family engagement practices and programs.[1]

Less understood, however, are educators' perspectives on the benefits of human-centered design. In a workshop on human-centered design in September 2018 co-facilitated by Global Family Research Project, the Early Learning Lab and National Center for Families Learning, we had an opportunity to elicit their thoughts. Participants included librarians, early childhood providers, and family literacy specialists, among others. The participants shared five ways that human-centered design benefits family engagement practice.

[1] https://globalfrp.org/Articles/Human-Centered-Design-An-Innovative-Tool-for-Professional-Learning-in-Family-Engagement

5 Benefits

It empowers families and creates equity.

It challenges assumptions and biases.

It helps educators to consider families' wishes and desires.

It promotes collaborative decision making.

It pushes educators out of their comfort zone.

1. It empowers families and creates equity.

Human-centered design puts families at the center of individual and organizational practice. It is a process that is intentional about engaging families and including their voices. Many workshop participants reflected on human-centered design as a powerful way to unlock the hidden potential of community members and transform them into change agents.

"Many of our families feel like they don't have a voice. They are not heard. Whether it be at school or whatever, I just think it's so empowering for them to be heard."

Participants also pointed out that this work takes time, and it requires building relationships and trust with families first and foremost. Because people who speak first at parent meetings are not always representative of the group, observing and continuing to talk with different families ensures that educators capture families' needs equitably.
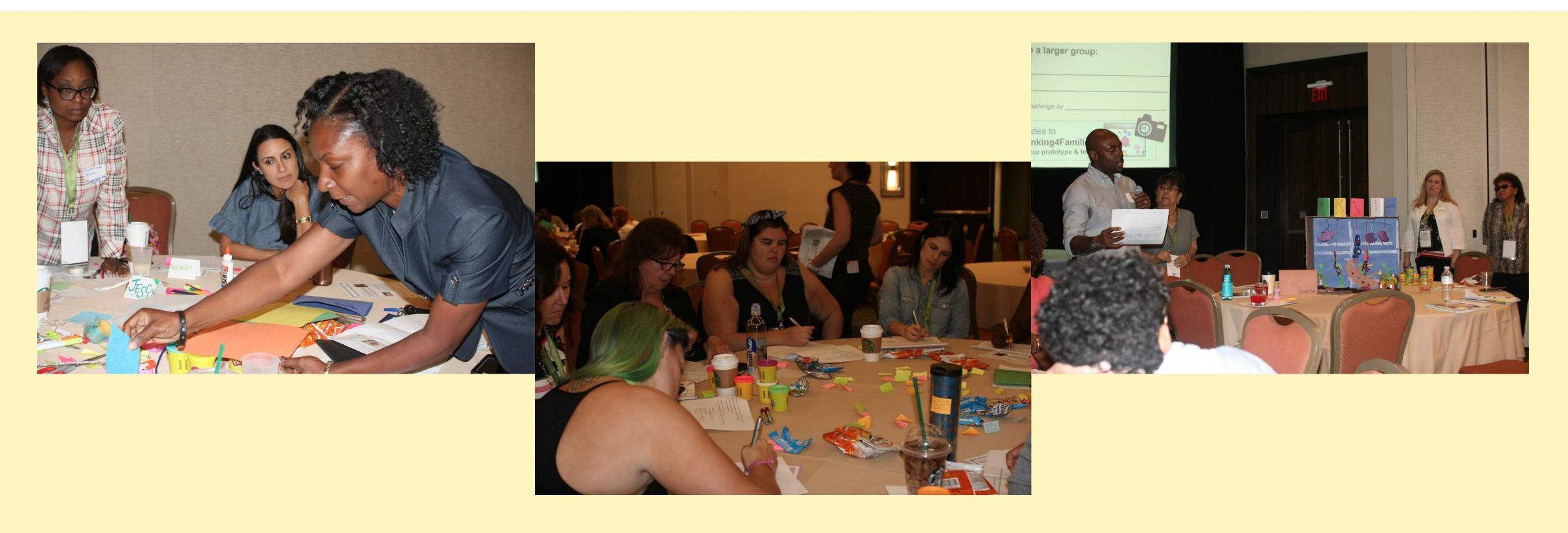
2. It challenges assumptions and biases.

Many participants reflected on how the different phases of the human-centered design process can help educators see things in a new way and get to know families' perspectives without passing judgment. It pushes people to empathize and challenge assumptions they might hold.

One participant explained from his own experience:

"I work with young fathers. A lot of what I do is about listening to them, just what human-centered design is about. As you go on and take time to ask questions and learn about them more—you don't judge. You see them from a different view. I saw the guys differently, I saw myself differently. It gave me a better appreciation and it made me work harder, it made me go about the way I work differently as well. Just like the human-centered design process, I am trying to learn about them [the young fathers] first and then we work on a solution together."

3. It helps educators to consider families' wishes and desires rather than jump to solutions.

As participants experimented with the human-centered design process, they began to recognize the importance of not jumping to conclusions or solutions. They saw the value of investing time in seeing and identifying the needs of families. Participants came to recognize that sometimes the problem they think they'll see is different from the problem that needs to be addressed. For this reason, participants also recognized the importance of testing out solutions and prototyping new ideas before going to full implementation.

"This workshop helped me to slow down and listen: Listen to what families are saying and formulate ideas from the response I get instead of going and talking at them or to them. Letting them speak to me. One of the things that I really learned from the design-thinking activity is that it's all about immersing yourself into that other environment and looking at it from a different point of view—as actually a person that is within it and using it, and then seeing whether that space conforms to what in our minds we were trying to do."

4. It promotes collaborative decision making.

Another significant benefit of human-centered design is that it is team-oriented and rooted in brainstorming and collective decision making. Because the process is collaborative in nature, participants envisioned a number of ways that human-centered design might be integrated into their organizations' culture. For example, it can be used as a vehicle for refining programs and services, reimagining professional learning, and creating new thinking in community-wide initiatives.

"Sometimes when you come together as a diverse community, one person gets up on the stage and presents and everybody nods and you ask for feedback, but people don't necessarily raise their hand and participate. With human-centered design, you have a specific action that you have to accomplish: Everybody feels like they can talk, they can build, they can participate."

5. It pushes educators out of their comfort zone.

Many participants noted that sometimes the process of seeking feedback and talking with families can be awkward, especially when it means leaving oneself vulnerable and open to criticism. This step, however uncomfortable, is necessary in the human-centered design process, so participants can accrue and understand families' feedback and adjust accordingly. Additionally, these face-to-face conversations further support empathy between practitioners and families, by giving practitioners a sense of what it might be like for a family seeking help who may also feel vulnerable to anticipated judgement and criticism.

> *"Families may be uncomfortable talking to us.*
> *They may be uncomfortable asking us for help.*
> *Human-centered design is a kind of way for us to*
> *feel what our patrons feel that we work for."*

Are you using human-centered design in your work with families?

If so, we'd love to hear about it.

Contact us at: info@globalfrp.org.

Learn more about human-centered design thinking with these resources:

Use Design Thinking to Raise Up Family Perspectives
https://medium.com/ideabook/use-design-thinking-to-raise-up-family-perspectives-a02cf061365d

Sustaining a Human-Centered Design Approach to Engaging Families
https://globalfrp.org/Articles/Sustaining-a-Human-Centered-Design-Approach-to-Engaging-Families

Human-Centered Design: An Innovative Tool for Professional Learning in Family Engagement
https://globalfrp.org/Articles/Human-Centered-Design-An-Innovative-Tool-for-Professional-Learning-in-Family-Engagement

Designing a Public Library For and With Families
https://globalfrp.org/Articles/Designing-a-Public-Library-For-and-With-Families

Design Thinking
https://www.ideou.com/pages/design-thinking

A Virtual Crash Course in Design Thinking
https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources-collections/a-virtual-crash-course-in-design-thinking