

Collaborative Relationships in Practice: Possibilities and challenges



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Abstract

The following three papers examine what collaboration is happening in New Zealand's early childhood education services currently, and provide exemplars of collaboration in three key areas: with parents and whānau; with Māori, iwi and marae; and with local Pacific and other ethnic communities. We emphasise some differences in needs and priorities for different service types, and challenges for each. Finally, we discuss the extent to which government and umbrella group systems and policies support early childhood education services to create collaborative relationships. These papers draw from the findings of four recent research projects: An Evaluation of the Initial Uses and Impact of Equity Funding; Quality in Parent/Whānau-led Services; phase 1 of a Locality-based Evaluation of Pathways to the Future – Ngā Huarahi Arataki; and NZCER's national survey of early childhood education services carried out in late 2003 and early 2004.

Introduction

Diane Mara and myself are senior researchers with the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) and Arapera Royal Tangaere is Manager, Research and Policy Development, with Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust. For the last four years we have been working together to undertake research and evaluation on aspects of the *Early Childhood Education Strategic Plan*. We have collaborated on three research and evaluation studies, all done under contract to the Ministry of Education as part of the commitment of the *Strategic Plan* that research into early childhood education (ECE) will be ongoing, and support particular strategies. These projects are: *Quality in Parent/Whānau-led Services* (Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara, & Wylie, 2006); *An Evaluation of the Initial Uses and Impact of Equity Funding* (Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara, & Wylie, in press-a); and the baseline phase of a locality-based evaluation of *Pathways to the Future – Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara, & Wylie, in press-b). The studies have involved intensive case studies, including observations, questionnaires and interviews in the diverse ECE service types. Across all three studies we undertook a total of 121 case studies.

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research also carried out a national survey in late 2003 in which we surveyed parents, parent committee members, teachers, and management from 531 ECE services, except kōhanga reo.¹

These four pieces of work provide a substantive amount of evidence about current issues and challenges, for policy makers, early childhood educators, managers and parents, and the community organisations and services that surround them, in relation to the collaborative relationships goal of the *Strategic Plan*. It is clear from our findings that this goal of the *Early Childhood Education Strategic Plan* is largely dependent on local initia-

tives and practices. There is much variability in how well such collaborative relationships are working.

This journal issue presents three papers from myself, Diane Mara and Arapera Royal Tangaere. I will give an overview of our research approach and discuss ECE service collaboration with parents and whānau. Our view of parents and whānau is not as 'customers' or 'clients', but as family who are deeply concerned about their children and interested in their learning. We approach our analysis of ECE service collaboration with parents and whānau from a base understanding that children benefit from adults in their lives working together. There can also be benefits for parents and whānau from such collaboration. My paper will be on the *Early Childhood Education Strategic Plan* action to:

Develop a policy framework for parent support and development that links it with ECE service provision. (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 17)

My focus will be on findings from our studies about the aspects of ECE provision linked to parents gaining parenting education and social support. I also raise questions and issues about collaboration among government agencies, local bodies and ECE services in provision of services to meet the needs of children and parents/whānau.

Diane Mara's paper, which follows, focuses on the *Strategic Plan's* action to:

Provide support for ECE services to strengthen links with local Pasifika communities and other ethnic communities. (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 17)

The third paper in our series, by Arapera Royal Tangaere, is about the kaupapa and collaborative relationships of kōhanga reo and the *Strategic Plan's* action to:

Provide support for ECE services to strengthen links with whānau, hapū and iwi. (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 17)

We use examples from the study of parent and whānau-led services to examine what is possible for 'insiders' in their roles as parents and whānau in these services to gain parenting education and social support; and for Māori in kōhanga reo and puna, Pacific parents in Pasifika ECE centres and groups, and parents in community language playgroups to establish strong links with their cultural communities. We describe issues for services and parents from all four studies in respect to these aspects, and examine some possibilities and challenges. One challenge, we believe, is for ECE services to cross boundaries of service type and collaborate in ways that can contribute to greater understanding and support for each other.

Parenting education

Our research on quality in parent and whānau-led services (Mitchell et al., 2006) was useful in enabling us to see which services were doing well on outcomes related to parenting education and social support, and to analyse the factors that helped these services to make a greater contribution to this outcome than others were making. Parent and whānau-led services in our study were eight playcentres, six kōhanga reo, three Pasifika early childhood centres, three Pacific Islands Early Childhood Groups, four playgroups, two community language playgroups and two puna. In the playcentres, playgroups, Pacific Islands Early Childhood Group, and puna in our study, parents took responsibility for the education programme and worked as educators, sometimes alongside a paid supervisor. In other centres paid staff were mainly responsible for the education programme, with parents and whānau having varying levels of involvement in the education programme.

One measure of parenting education was obtained from the 263 responses to a parent questionnaire asking parents whether they had learned new skills or knowledge from their involvement in the ECE service. We also interviewed parents as a group within the centre and asked about their learning. Sixty-two per cent gave examples of what they had learned that supported their parenting. These fell into the following categories:

- learning about child development and children's learning (54 per cent);
- how parents can support, encourage and extend children's learning (37 per cent);
- ideas for activities and resources parents can use at home (36 per cent);

- ECE curriculum and working in an ECE programme (31 per cent);
- behaviour management (29 per cent);
- improved communication skills (27 per cent), and
- general parenting skills, such as increased confidence as a parent (22 per cent).

The comments parents made were often moving, revealing a depth of feeling about the benefits of what they learned, especially in relation to managing behaviour and interacting respectfully and responsively with children. Here are four statements:

If it was not for playcentre, I would have been a different person than I am today. I've learnt you've got to put yourself in the child's situation and respect their feelings and think how we would feel at their age – about being patient and thinking outside the square.

Getting down to child's level. Focusing on child's strengths and interests.

I've been able to use new strategies at home with my child to reduce both his and my stress levels.

Knowledge of how to deal with behaviour in the centre and using it [with] my children at home. Try my best not to hit children or smack. It will take time, but I'll get there.

These convey a sense of positive benefit for parent and child that flows through to home, a strengths based approach to interacting with children, and willingness to think about the child's viewpoints.

Active participation in the education programme, in assessment, planning and evaluation, and in training courses and workshops were associated with parents reporting learning. The group of parents that reported these benefits compared with the group that reported lesser or no benefits had the following characteristics:

- a higher percentage had completed higher levels of study in their ECE service, such as Playcentre Course 3, course 4 and certificates, Kōhanga Reo Te Ara Tuatahi, Te Ara Tuarua, and Whakapakari, or ECE qualifications;
- a higher percentage had participated in workshops or professional development;
- a higher percentage worked directly with children in the education programme;

- a higher percentage were involved in assessment, planning and evaluation;
- the parents reporting benefits tended to have more years of experience in an ECE setting.

We found that a much higher percentage of playcentre parents were strong on this outcome and this was most likely to be across the range of areas, including adults' role in encouraging learning. This finding is reflective of the high level of support and commitment provided through playcentre for parent education, and the role playcentre parents play as educators in the programme. On the other hand, playgroup parents who also acted as educators delivering the education programme but who did not have much access to workshops and training, tended to report lesser parent education benefits. Participation in the education programme and in training seem to contribute in combination to parenting education.

Not surprisingly, stronger centres for parent learning placed emphasis on adult education opportunities and actively encouraged adults to take these up. They also encouraged participation in the education programme, such as those offered by the teacher in a community language playgroup who encouraged everyone to take part in children's singing at the playgroup:

Okay everybody, now we are going to sing and you all have to come and do this. Otherwise everybody will sit back and be shy.

She enabled adults to take books and videotapes home, and encouraged parents to sing songs and do activities at home.

Roles within the centre were shared – every adult had opportunity to contribute as their circumstances allowed, and they were encouraged to take on responsibilities that stretched them.

There was a depth of informal discussion about children and learning happening among parents and staff in the stronger centres. Some parents in the study were observed talking about issues at home that they found difficult to deal with, or concerns about their children, and parents could learn from others in the group provided there was someone on the spot who was knowledgeable and responded. If there wasn't a knowledgeable adult present, these opportunities were often missed.

Valuing families and a climate of

warm and responsive relationships among adults was a basis for parenting education: where there was a split parent group and factions within the centre, parents reported less or no learning for themselves.

Social support

Jack and Jordan's (1999) synthesis of UK and US research shows that incidences of abuse and neglect are associated with families who lack mutually supportive relationships and social support. Social support for families is increasingly important in a society like New Zealand where there is high mobility and where many families do not have the support of extended family or whānau.

Parents and whānau who were interviewed all described at least one of the following ways in which their centre provided social support.

Parents said the centre provided a local meeting place where adults got to know each other, made friends and also provided mutual support in bringing up their children. For example:

Yeh, you can bitch and moan — it's venting time for me. Always someone to listen. (Playgroup)

It contributed to a sense of belonging through, for example, offering opportunity to interact with others of the same cultural group, and opportunity to develop friendships with others in a similar situation. For example, parents from a community language playgroup said the playgroup provided a social meeting place for parents with the same culture, and a place where children could associate with other children from the same culture 'without feeling isolated and unusual':

When raising children, the culture becomes really important because you want to raise your children in the way you were raised. It's like a bridge when raising children between two cultures — you can talk to each other.

These centres contributed to building community identity through participation in other community organisations and events such as taking part in cultural festivals or fundraising for the local school. For example:

We are contributing members of society. We do powhiri at the marae and perform in the community. (Kōhanga reo)

The centres that were 'stronger' in terms of mutual social support for

parents tended to have comfortable provision for adults as well as children, and shared leadership responsibilities. They did not exclude anybody, and nor were one or two people overburdened. They offered opportunity for parents to participate regularly, and were mainly sessional centres.

A higher proportion of playgroups and playcentres were 'stronger' on this outcome. Rural centres were more likely to emphasise strong social support. At the end of one interview in a very isolated playgroup, the parents told the field researcher the things they really wanted her to know about their group were:

- the fellowship of other women;
- the importance of social interactions for adults and children;
- friendships that can be lifelong for children in their area;
- their strong sense of belonging, and
- their need for regular support.

Parents' views of information and advice about their child

The NZCER's national survey findings indicated that a substantial minority of parents and parent committee members wanted more information and advice from their ECE service than they were getting:

- Eighteen per cent wanted information about their child that they did not currently have, and a further 14 per cent were not sure if they wanted more information. Similar percentages of parent committee members gave these responses.
- Nineteen per cent of both parents and committee members wanted more 'ideas for how I can support my child's learning', followed by information about the child's progress (15 per cent parents, 12 per cent parent committee), and assessments about their own child (15 per cent parents, 11 per cent parent committee).
- While playcentre parents had a high level of participation in assessment and planning, only 43 per cent of kindergarten parents and 50 per cent of education and care centre parents had such participation. Committee members (60 per cent kindergarten and 51 per cent education and care) were more likely to participate in assessment and planning.

The parental survey in our evaluation of *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Mitchell et al., in press-b) showed an even higher percent-

age – 31 per cent – of the 886 parents responding wanted more information about their child. Pacific parents had the widest range of expectations that their ECE centre would meet in relation to parental needs. A higher percentage of Pacific parents (52 per cent) wanted more information about their child and what they could do to help their child. Although most parents surveyed felt welcome in the service, 30 per cent of the parents responding wanted more time to talk with the teacher about their child. The main reasons why they did not have time to talk were that there was not always a suitable time (15 per cent) or the teacher was too busy (11 per cent). Some also said they themselves were too busy (10 per cent).

Offering opportunities for participation, parenting education and support

Constructing everyday responsive and reciprocal relationships among the adults and children who belong to the ECE service is a foundation for developing a learning community.

In their study of how three New Zealand ECE centres supported 'family resilience', Duncan, Bowden and Smith (2006) re-examined the role of planned parent education programmes within ECE centres as meaningful support for parents. They found that:

The informal support that is provided by staff at the three EC centres was the key to meaningful support for the families that access their service... Families tended to see informal support as putting less pressure on parents, and as more respectful of their parental rights than other forms of 'organized' information-sharing or meetings. (p. 11)

They also reported that planned education programmes did not meet family needs or interests. Our findings also point to the importance of informal support within a comfortable and welcoming environment, warm, responsive and positive relationships among adults, and a philosophy that actively values parents and whānau. But we found that planned education courses and workshops can provide meaningful learning experiences that are eagerly sought. Perhaps the difference between our findings and those of Duncan et al. (2006) is that the training programmes, wānanga, courses and workshops offered in the parent and whānau-led services in our study coincided with parents' goals for their child, the service and their role within

the service. Playcentre parents did playcentre training because they wanted to work as educators in the programme, and playgroup parents wanted professional advice and workshops so they could be better equipped to work with children. Kōhanga reo parents who were not fluent attended kura reo and Pacific parents who were not fluent were learning their community language because of their strong desire to speak in their own language with their child at home, and keep up with their child's learning. Parents were hooked into learning that contributed to their shared aspirations.

Assessment practices can also provide opportunity for parents and whānau to contribute, share their insights and knowledge, and learn themselves. *Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* explains and gives exemplars of 'assessments that make visible learning that is valued so that the learning community (children, families, whānau, teachers and beyond) can foster ongoing and diverse learning pathways' (Ministry of Education, 2004, Book 5, p. 2). The books provide tangible illustrations of a range of assessment formats that can invite contribution to curriculum and assessment in the interests of children's learning, and contribute to the learning of adults as well.

Service collaboration

Our locality-based evaluation of *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Mitchell et al., in press-b) and NZCER's national survey gathered evidence about parental views of service provision and incidences of their child attending more than one ECE service. There are some aspects that are particularly relevant in considering the 'jigsaw' of provision that is available to meet parent and whānau needs, and that are worth thinking about in relation to the *Strategic Plan* collaborative relationships goal. We found:

- Twenty-two per cent of children in both the national survey and *Strategic Plan* evaluation attended more than one ECE service. Findings from the evaluation showed that attending more than one service increased with the child's age, from 14 per cent of those aged under two, to 23 per cent of four-year-olds. Parents who gave reasons for attending more than one

service seem to be choosing combinations based mainly on overall considerations of hours available in a service, cost, and programmes.

- Both the national survey and evaluation of the *Strategic Plan* found the incidence of children attending more than one service was high for children at playcentre (31 per cent and 35 per cent respectively). The NZCER's national survey found a high percentage of home-based ECE service children (48 per cent) also attended more than one service. (We had a very small sample of home-based service parents in the locality-based evaluation).
- In some localities, especially isolated localities, there is limited choice of services. In some localities, some services are vulnerable and could close.

Patterns of attending more than one ECE service and the reasons for this warrant further investigation, since there are implications for provision. Patterns of choice may change with the implementation of 20 hours free ECE in teacher-led services, and services may adapt their operation as a consequence. In Quebec, the introduction of universal childcare in the late 1990s was associated with a very large increase in the use of childcare, including shifts from informal to formal childcare (Baker, Gruber, & Milligan, 2005). If services change their operation, what will the consequences be for the number of children they cater for? And what will the flow-on effects be to other services in their localities, if children remain in one service rather than being enrolled in more than one? If a service becomes unsustainable what does this mean for parents who would like to use that service type? And where will those children go for their ECE? The competitive market approach has not ensured that services are available where they are needed, or that they fulfil a range of purposes to meet the needs and circumstances of parents and caregivers.

These are pertinent considerations and questions that point to the need for ECE service provision to be coherently planned. The Ministry of Education has undertaken network analyses in some localities, identified the need for new provision in areas of low ECE enrolment, and made it a priority to support estab-

lishment of provision. But there is little evidence of local ECE services being involved in planning a network of provision in their locality. I was interested in the following statement from Charles Leadbeater of DEMOS (an independent think tank and research organisation in the UK) about 'users as citizens and co-designers of services':

Professionals are still providing the solutions for dependent users, albeit in a more personalised fashion. What would happen if we started to imagine personalisation at a 'deeper' level, whereby users began to take on some of the role of the producers in the actual design and shaping of the education system? ... Here, we can imagine users not only having a choice between predefined services or packages of services, but also having a voice in what those services looked like in the first place. (Leadbeater, 2004, p. 12)

It could be useful for the Ministry of Education to work with local ECE services and parents to develop a coherent pattern of service provision where there is a need for this. Local bodies and other government agencies could be involved in working out how to link with and support the early childhood centres in their locality. Such an approach could invoke a genuine sense of local commitment to the quality of ECE services in a community, as well as to establishing provision that meets parent and whānau needs.

Possibilities for collaborative relationships

I see many possibilities for strengthening collaboration with parents and whānau. I'd like to end with two.

Collaboration between ECE services of different types seems to be minimal. I was very surprised that over a third (36 per cent) of services in our national survey had no or very limited contact with other ECE services in their locality. Where there was collaboration this was mainly to share professional development, followed by sharing resources and providing mutual support. Kindergartens reported the highest levels of collaboration, and this was with other kindergartens in their association.

Even when children attended more than one service, 51 per cent of teacher/educators reported no relationship existed. From the written comments the most usual contact was through the parents. Yet, the diverse ECE centres have strengths and expertise that they

See back cover for distance learning courses offered by the Children's Issues Centre

could share with others. The community meetings we held for the evaluation of *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* where all local ECE services were invited along with representatives of community organisations and services, were very well attended. All the community meetings endorsed the role that the evaluation had played in bringing people together within the locality, some saying this was the first time they had met as a sector. Some wanted to continue to get together on a regular basis for discussion and to contribute to understanding. There is a real possibility for collaborating on a local basis rather than just competing.

The gains to work of the parent and whānau-led centres in our study was based on the following principles:

- parents and whānau working together to promote common aspirations and goals;
- parents being hooked in, and
- respecting and valuing the contributions of others.

The idea of shared endeavours (Rogoff, 1994) seems to be one of the factors encouraging parent and whānau participation, and its flow on to benefits of learning and support for parents and whānau. Langsted (1994), writing about quality ECE from the child's perspective argued that 'The game itself and social relationships are the most important things. Skills and competence are by-products' (p. 33).

In a similar way, parent and whānau skills and competence derived from their participation in the parent and whānau-led ECE services were by-products of parents' and whānau central interest in contributing to learning opportunities for their children, and gains for their community. Several writers have argued the value in ECE of discussing pedagogical work and aspirations for children. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) explored the notion of constructing the ECE centre as a forum where people can come together for dialogue on a range of topics. Wilton Playcentre, as one of the first designated Centres of Innovation, held an exercise early in the Centre of Innovation project where parents met together to talk about what they really valued – this seemed to contribute to clarity about vision and purpose, bring people into closer connection, and draw attention to the shared goals and values that are a source of strength for them (Mitchell et al., 2004; Mitchell, 2005). Broström (2003), discussing *Te Whāriki* from a Danish perspective, has suggest-

ed the need for more discussion of how we understand and define our visions for children, so that we can incorporate the visions into the activities we create with children. Early childhood education services can be places for genuine discussion with parents, whānau, staff and community about aspirations for children and pedagogical work. *Kei Tua o te Pae. Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004) has exemplars of how wider contribution can be generated through narrative forms of assessment that invite contribution. At Wadestown Kindergarten, a new Centre of Innovation, we are using video recordings demonstrating children's communicative competencies as a catalyst for discussion with parents and whānau of what it means to be a multi-literate communicator in an ECE centre. We could have local and regional forums for discussion, not only of children's issues and pedagogical work, but tying in to provision of services in a locality. Opening out in these ways could contribute to richer ECE services, a greater sense of shared endeavours, and wider community participation.

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Endnote

- 1 The NZCER national survey is the first comprehensive national survey of licensed early childhood education services in New Zealand. It provides a baseline picture of the situation for these services at the beginning of the implementation of the *Strategic Plan*. A report on the survey was due to be published in August 2006.

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