

Jeanette Clarkin-Phillips and Margaret Carr

# Strengthening responsive and reciprocal relationships in a whānau tangata centre: A summary

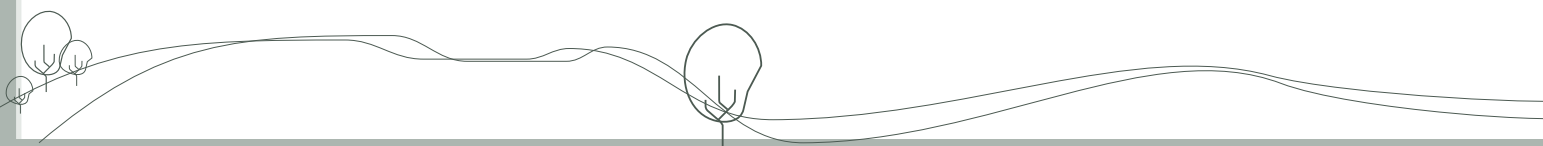
This project came about after discussions with the general manager of the Wellington Region Free Kindergarten Association and Jeanette Clarkin-Phillips (University of Waikato) about setting up a research partnership to support the teachers at Taitoko Kindergarten in Levin. The teachers were establishing an integrated community centre (the whānau tangata centre) as part of a parent support and development initiative funded by the Ministry of Education in conjunction with the Ministry of Social Development. The parent support and development initiative in Levin includes a drop-in centre for parents, parent workshops on topics of their choice, a well-resourced whānau room, facilities for infants and toddlers, school liaison visits and liaison with local health centres. The initiative at Taitoko is one of six pilot parent support and development projects. These pilot projects do not include any research components to evaluate the processes and outcomes for teaching and learning, or the level of engagement of the community. This TLRI research project, in one centre, researched these aspects of the initiative in an ongoing action research project.

The parent support and development contracts are a relatively new initiative for New Zealand, and this research project was designed to provide information to guide this teaching and learning policy for future similar initiatives. The aim of the TLRI research project was to investigate the development of the whānau tangata centre at Taitoko Kindergarten with teaching and learning in mind.

## Aims and objectives

Although the kindergarten teaching team members were excited at being a part of the parent support and development initiative, they were also aware that they would face challenges that would affect their practice. Their commitment to ensuring effective teaching and learning at Taitoko Kindergarten led them to seek evidence-based teaching practices, inside the vision of the parent support and development initiative. Their involvement with this TLRI research project has helped to provide this.

Through action research, the research team has addressed the teachers' questions associated with (a) the strengthening of relationships (how this has been done so far, and how might it be furthered); (b) changes in practice (what is possible, what appears to be effective); (c) diversity (how a range of "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) can be shared and included in curriculum); and (d) documentation (how this can engage families and learners).





### Strengthening relationships

One aim of the research project was to ascertain whether the establishment of the whānau tangata centre was strengthening the relationship with the community and providing new learning opportunities for the children, parents and whānau.

### Changes in practice

The teaching team and Wellington Region Free Kindergarten Association were committed to ensuring that the whānau tangata initiative had positive outcomes for children's learning and that the teachers were able to reflect on their practice and make changes to accommodate the strengths and interests of children and their parents and whānau throughout the establishment of the integrated centre. The research project aimed to help establish if this was happening.

### Diversity

The teachers were particularly interested in responding to the diversity of community at the kindergarten. They wanted to know, through the TLRI research project, what further strategies they might use as teachers to strengthen their relationships with a community that includes 59 percent Māori and 19 percent Pasifika parents and whānau.

### Documentation

The teaching team was keen to have avenues available to them to look at their teaching, planning and documentation in an informed manner and to respond accordingly. The research project provided such an avenue.

## Research questions

There were two research questions:

1. What processes and practices have enabled the whānau tangata centre to strengthen relationships with the community and to provide new learning opportunities for the children, parents and whānau?
2. What strategies can further strengthen the relationships with the community, and provide enhanced learning opportunities for the children and parents and whānau?

## Research design and methodology

This TLRI project was a design-based action research project, set alongside the parent support and development project. The parent support and development project was not entirely about teaching and learning; it was about the contribution to the wellbeing of communities through the integration of services, including education. The university researchers for the TLRI project were invited to research the opportunities for children's learning that were made possible—even

probable—during the period of extra funding of the parent support and development project that was intended to integrate services for families.

Design-based researchers bring ideas about intervention and assumptions about teaching and learning with them. Our view of the research, and that of the teachers and the Wellington Region Free Kindergarten Association, was five-fold; namely:

1. This was not about "improving" at-risk families.
2. Rather, it was about relational agency (a capacity and an inclination to engage with the educational setting in ways that are enjoyable and empowering) in an educational setting, where, in the context of this research, relational agency is a combination of all of the four principles in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996); that is, a combination of the principles of empowerment, relationships, family and community and holistic development. Knowledge and skill would be part of this, but it was going to be fundamentally about providing families and children with experiences that would contribute to "enhancing their dispositions to engage with and transform features of their worlds" (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004, p. 147).
3. The research would examine how families' and children's strengths and histories could be used to develop reciprocal relationships between children, families, communities and the early childhood programme.
4. The research would explore the idea that this early childhood centre might be a "hub" for these reciprocal relationships.
5. It was expected that the hub would be itself a place of lively reciprocal and responsive relationships that would be able to reach out beyond the walls of the kindergarten.

Data for the research were obtained through a variety of methods and sources depending on the focus of the research question. These included copies of learning stories (Carr, 2001) from children's portfolios and whānau voice sheets, tape-recorded conversations with the teachers and researchers, informal interviews with playgroup parents and semistructured interviews with the senior teacher and general manager of the Wellington Region Free Kindergarten Association.

## Findings

### Strengthening relationships

The findings for research question one are located in the context of entry points or gateways to participation and engagement. Hargreaves (2004) talks about gateways for student personalised learning and that these gateways are part of the everyday context of learning and teaching. We have drawn parallels with



parent learning and engagement and see a similar significance in these gateways. For parents to engage in their children's learning they need to have entry points that complement their everyday lives rather than provide barriers by being something outside of their context. Bringing their children to kindergarten provides a gateway for parents and whānau and teachers to build relationships for further engagement in children's learning (research question two).

### **Gateway one: The playgroup**

The establishment of a fortnightly playgroup for children under two years of age has provided a means of access and participation for parents and whānau in a variety of activities. At the onset, playgroup participants were asked for suggestions about possible activities, workshops, speakers and so on. Over the course of the TLRI project, the playgroup has grown in numbers, become a weekly event, and supported parents and whānau in many ways. Interviews with playgroup participants provided evidence of the positive effect of the playgroup in their lives.

### **Gateway two: whānau engagement**

Before the project, teachers had been writing learning stories and revisiting them with the children. During the research project, the teachers began to send the stories home regularly in an "official" book bag and invited families to read the stories with their children. The invitations became more insistent with the inclusion of a "whānau voice" page which was redesigned to encourage contributions. After the introduction of the practice of sending portfolios home systematically, there was a marked increase in parent and whānau contributions. Analysis of the parents' contributions demonstrated an intelligent awareness and understanding of children's learning.

Teachers also started to write comments back to parents and whānau and include these in the child's portfolio to validate and encourage contributions from parents/whānau.

Digital photos of children, parents and whānau sharing portfolios at the kindergarten also encouraged parents, whānau, and children to revisit the learning stories and discuss the content, thus supporting learning.

### **Gateway three: Digital camera and "Spotty Dog" goes home**

Whānau were invited to take Spotty Dog home overnight or over a weekend, and to record his activities on the digital camera that was provided. The teachers then added a text, dictated by the child or the family; and sometimes the whānau had already written the story of Spotty Dog's adventures.

The portfolios and the stories about Spotty Dog could be described as "boundary objects" (Lemke, 2000, p. 281), in that they belonged in two places and provided an

entry point for conversations and communication across different settings and different time frames.

## **Relationships and relational agency**

### **Research question 2**

One of the recurring themes that emerged from the research was the importance of relationships. The teachers realised that it was the building of responsive and reciprocal relationships that provided the foundation for empowering and supporting parents. In a community where professionals are likely to be viewed with suspicion and distrust, the accepting of parents and whānau for their skills and knowledge by the teachers at Taitoko was important in enabling parents and whānau to feel valued and able to make a contribution to the community and their children's learning.

Our major interest was the *children's learning, whānau relationships* and the intersection between these two. We have borrowed the term "relational agency" from the work of Anne Edwards and her colleagues (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Edwards & Mackenzie, 2008) to describe this process of building responsive and reciprocal relationships that empower and support parents. We identified three aspects of social practice that contributed to reciprocal relationships.

### **The people**

The teachers' attitudes allowed parents and whānau to have a sense of belonging and worth, as shown by this parent's comment about the community and the kindergarten:

... this is classed as a low decile area and I don't think this kindergarten reflects anything like that. These teachers don't put that kind of image forward around here. Nowhere does it say that this is a low decile kindergarten and therefore, you know, we shouldn't have good resources, we shouldn't have good teachers and things like that. The teachers are very professional.

Other people were also significant and made a difference to the participation and engagement of whānau. These included the administrative support person at the kindergarten, the kaimahi (one Māori and one Tongan) employed by the parent support and development project to work with both children and whānau, and the senior teacher and the general manager of the Wellington Region Free Kindergarten Association.

The willingness of people in leadership roles to provide opportunities and use resources to remove barriers was particularly significant in ensuring that relationships were strengthened and nurtured.

Parents and whānau began to take leadership roles and instigate initiatives that met their needs and helped fulfil their aspirations for their children. Providing healthy lunches for children at the kindergarten and running a holiday programme during the summer break were both examples of this.



### Teacher profiles in the portfolios

As another attempt to strengthen and build relationships, the teachers decided to put together a page each about themselves to place at the front of children's portfolios. It was hoped that these "profiles" would provide connections with families and break down barriers by allowing parents and whānau to have some knowledge about each teacher. Parents and whānau have commented on these profiles; for example, one parent commented that, "We also like the teacher profile parts, it's nice to know a little about the teachers" while another parent states, "It's awesome to learn about the teachers."

### Displays on wall

The teachers displayed children's learning stories on the wall of the kindergarten that referred to connections with community. The stories included themes of: transition to school, people, connections to the community and the children's world outside the kindergarten, and recognition of home language.

In terms of messages, all the stories demonstrated a valuing of conversations with children, children were encouraged to read the stories and most of the stories touched on the need for continuity of teaching and learning and relationships.

## Recommendations and implications

The longitudinal study *Competent Learners @ 16* (Wylie & Hodgen, 2007) suggests that the building of solid foundations for learning prior to school is important; therefore any initiatives that allow parents and whānau to engage in their children's learning at an early age would serve to enhance learning for both children and adults. The initiatives by the teaching team at Taitoko have resulted in a greater engagement by parents and whānau in their children's learning and the parent support and development contract has offered avenues

for the provision of services and support to assist this engagement.

Locating parent support and development projects— together with research that focuses on the principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996)—in early childhood centres not only provides support for enabling parents and whānau to transform their lives; it also has capacity to affect children's learning and lifelong learning dispositions. This TLRI project has shown that the two are closely connected.

Continuing to offer contracts such as the parent support and development project, together with research that focuses on the principles of *Te Whāriki*, (Ministry of education, 1996) would be a policy that would support social justice.

## References

- Carr, M. (2001). *Assessment in early childhood settings: Learning stories*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Edwards, A., & D'Arcy, C. (2004). Relational agency and disposition in sociocultural accounts of learning to teach. *Educational Review*, 56(2), 147–155.
- Edwards, A., & Mackenzie, L. (2008). Identity shifts in informal learning trajectories. In B. Van Oers, W. Wardekker, E. Elbers & R. Van der Veer (Eds.), *The transformation of learning: Advances in cultural-historical activity theory* (pp. 163–181). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- González, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hargreaves, D. (2004). *Personalising learning. Next steps in working laterally*. London: Specialist Schools Trust.
- Lemke, J. L. (2000). Across the scales of time: Artifacts, activities, and meanings in ecosocial systems. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 7(4), 273–290.
- Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Wylie, C., & Hodgen, E. (2007) *Competent learners @ 16: Competency levels and development over time*. Wellington: Learning Media.

The full reports of all TLRI projects are published on the TLRI website ([www.tlri.org.nz](http://www.tlri.org.nz)).

## Lead authors and researchers



**Jeanette Clarkin-Phillips** is a lecturer and associate director of early childhood programmes at the University of Waikato. Her MEd thesis was about teacher professional development and distributed leadership. Her research interests include leadership and strengthening relationships with families and whānau.



**Margaret Carr** is professor of education at the University of Waikato. She is a co-author of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, a series of 20 booklets on assessment for learning, and she has researched widely on learning in the early years.