

**CHILDREN, STAFF, AND PARENTS: BUILDING RESPECTFUL
RELATIONSHIPS IN AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CONTEXTS**

Keynote address to the 8th Early Childhood Convention, "Making change for children now: Shaping early childhood today", 22–25 September 2003, Palmerston North

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Introduction

Mihi

It is a great privilege to have been invited to participate in the 8th Early Childhood Convention. There is a lovely sense of moving forward together that is reflected in the conference theme: “Making change for children now: Shaping early childhood today”. I am delighted to contribute to the conference theme alongside my Australian colleague and collaborator in research, Professor Glenda MacNaughton. While our presentation today focuses especially on the conference strand “Working in partnership”, the work of the early childhood centres we are going to describe has relevance for all four conference strands.

Collaborative relationships between parents and teachers in early childhood settings have moved to the forefront of education practice and policy initiatives, as researchers and practitioners have demonstrated the very positive effects that come when parents and teachers work together in the interests of children (Whalley & the Pen Green Centre Team, 2001). In New Zealand, the Government’s 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 2002) has an entire goal to promote collaborative relationships in recognition that “Children’s interests and development are fostered if well-being of their family is supported; if their family, culture, knowledge and community are respected; and if there is a strong connection and consistency among all aspects of the child’s world.” The Desirable Objectives and Practices have a range of requirements for management and educators to work in partnership with parents/guardians and whānau, and to communicate and consult with them.

Today we want to discuss what we have learned about issues and possibilities for building staff: parent relationships in a research project, “Parent involvement in children’s learning”, undertaken collaboratively by teams of teachers, professional development advisers, and researchers in New Zealand and Australia. The aim of the project is to undertake action research and professional development in early childhood centres to strengthen ways in which parents, teachers, and whānau work together to enhance children’s learning through collaboration. We chose to do the research in kindergartens and education and care centres rather than parent-led services, to see what is possible in settings where parents are not the main educators. The research project and professional development in each country and each centre unfolded in different ways and this paper describes the themes and issues that have come from these different trajectories.

Teachers were invited to join the project because of their interest in parent involvement within their own centre, commitment to working with their chosen professional development adviser to investigate their own pedagogy, and willingness to participate in the research project. In New Zealand, the project required commitment over and above professional development: participation in meetings with the six participating centres at the start and finish of the project and organisation and involvement in case study work in each of the centres.

The action research and working with families was based on three principles:

- that parents and staff are co-educators of children;
- that sharing understanding and knowledge of children from different viewpoints and from different settings can help adults to support and extend children’s learning at home and in the centre; and
- that working to empower and develop equitable relationships for parents and staff will contribute to each party’s understanding of children, teaching, and learning.

In the first meeting of teachers, researchers, and professional development advisers in New Zealand we discussed research papers from Glenda MacNaughton and Patrick Hughes (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999, 2002), that highlighted issues about power imbalances between staff and parents. For the New Zealand teachers, this was also a link with the Australian research project. One of the problems highlighted by Glenda and Patrick was the difficulty for many teachers in reconciling their professional knowledge and expertise with parents' personal beliefs and understandings. In New Zealand, this difficulty came to the forefront in a centre where a number of parents viewed appropriate practice as highly formalised and structured teaching. In other centres, views of appropriate practice were not so sharply contested, and it was easier for teachers to work with parents to develop shared understanding of children.

We also discussed the work of Pen Green (Whalley, 1997) in involving parents and two participants in our project, Maggie Haggerty and Bob Drummond, had spent time working at Pen Green. The Pen Green experience of working with diverse parents, being committed to developing mutual understanding and sharing experiences, taking risks, and making mistakes, gave us much inspiration. Margy Whalley is here at the Early Childhood Convention and I want to take the opportunity to acknowledge her and the Pen Green Team for their extraordinary contribution to international understanding of finding ways for working with parents.

Within the project, we aimed to develop participatory relationships, to welcome, incorporate, learn from, and build on the knowledge, skills, and understanding of all players. Like Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, we would argue that such relationships require "an ethics, which emanates from respect for each child and recognition of difference and multiplicity, and which struggles to avoid making the other into the same as oneself" (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p.156).

These ideas were useful in the work of the centres, and the readings were sometimes returned to in relation to teachers' individual experiences when similar issues were raised.

Methods

The research study sought to explore the process of change over the course of a year's professional development in strengthening involvement and collaboration and involvement of parents in the life of the centre, and the role of professional development and external support in helping parents and teachers to collaborate as partners.

Data were gathered from:

- documentation of practices within the setting;
- centre policies;
- notes from the professional development adviser of the work with teachers;
- a survey of parents at the end of the project;
- interviews of the four groups of participants: parents, teachers, children (where old enough), and professional development advisers at the start and end of the project; and
- the centres' network meetings.

Our interviews with parents, teachers, and professional development advisers asked for views about centre practices, relationships, and communication between parents and teacher, parents' involvement in the life of the centre, and integrated action between home and centre. Gathering information from these viewpoints enabled us to triangulate data, consider similarities and differences in perspectives, and identify themes and issues.

Information from the initial interviews was fed back to the people who participated, providing a source of data that was also useful for centres in deciding directions for focus.

This project was dynamic: it took unexpected pathways and benefited from the opportunity for project participants to get together during its course to discuss their work with all the project participants. Today, Glenda and I will describe some of what we have learned about building collaboration with parents in early childhood centres in Australia and New Zealand.

The New Zealand case studies

In New Zealand, the project was undertaken as a collaboration between the New Zealand Council for Educational Research¹, professional development advisers from Early Childhood Development and Wellington College of Education², and early childhood centres. Today, I draw on the work of five of these centres and their professional development advisers, Maggie Haggerty, Viv Hampton, and Ann Pairman. I want to pay tribute to the parents, teachers, and professional development advisers for their collaboration in this project and their willingness to have their work discussed in a wider forum. The mix of teachers, professional development advisers, and researchers working together is producing a rich and practical body of research findings that will be useful in informing both policy and practice. The detail of the work of the participating centres will be of great interest to parents and teachers alike.

Our project began with a 5-hour session with all participating teachers, professional development advisers, and me to discuss the research and professional development project, discuss findings and ideas from research literature, and start to think about the focus for each centre. From then, the professional development advisers worked with each centre team of staff individually, over a period of 9 months for approximately 15 hours per centre. We came together at the end of the project for teacher teams to describe what they had done and thought about, and for all of us to celebrate! This is work in progress – we now need to finalise the research report and determine future directions.

The primary concern in the New Zealand centres was with children's learning and wellbeing: teachers working with parents in order to strengthen relationships in the interests of children. There were some common themes in the focus taken by the different centres. But all the centres were unique, with different philosophies, families, staffing structures, and access to resources and support. The uniqueness of the centres was evident in the pathways they took and the challenges they encountered, and this indicated that there is no single prescription for all centres. However there were common themes in processes that enabled teachers to build relationships with parents.

Today I will highlight some of these themes:

- establishing an environment where parents and teachers have a sense of belonging;
- responding to individual diversity of families;
- two-way communication with parents about children's learning; and
- integrating action between home and early childhood centre.

These features seem to contribute to developing an early childhood centre where people are able to belong, where their knowledge, understanding, and contribution are valued, and where they can work together in the interests of children. In addition, the project showed some ways in which teachers investigated relationships and practices within their own settings, and how professional

¹ The NZCER study was funded through NZCER's purchase agreement with the Ministry of Education

² The professional development was funded through ECD's and Wellington College of Education's professional development contracts with the Ministry of Education

development supported them in this work. The project also highlighted conditions under which centres work and what is needed to support the kind of work that leads to positive change.

An environment where parents and teachers have a sense of belonging

In all these centres at the start of the project, parents whom I interviewed said they felt valued, welcome, and comfortable within the centres: there were close connections between parents and teachers and among parents, and a sense of belonging.

Asked what they liked most about the centre, and what helped parents feel welcome and comfortable, parents invariably talked about the teachers' relationship with the parents' child and centre children:

The interest of teachers in the children and their commitment to happiness and learning.

The respect shown to the children.

Teachers knowing the children intimately so you don't get anxious and uptight.

Teachers like the parents and look out for your kid.

These centres made connecting with parents and children a priority, and consciously formulated actions and strategies to create a welcoming atmosphere by:

- rostering a person to be at the door to welcome and farewell every parent and child;
- encouraging parents to get to know each other by introducing new families to other families; and
- recognising some parents are shy and watching out for them at social occasions.

In working with parents, teachers valued attributes of being non-judgemental, of respecting parents and children as people, and these were indicative of a belief in a "credit view" of parents and children.

Teachers wanted parents to feel the centre was their place as well as their child's so that teachers, parents, and children could share experiences and build an environment where parents felt comfortable to be themselves and participate in the life of the centre. Whalley (1999) [not in References] described the ways in which the Pen Green Centre adopted an open-door attitude to bridge the "conceptual gulf" (Athey, 1990) [not in References] that exists when people who lack shared experience start working together. Similar bridging happened in these New Zealand centres.

One of the centres was moving to a new site. Before the action research project, the teachers would have worked on the design with their Early Childhood Development co-ordinator. Now, their greater awareness of the value of "opening the doors and having parents' ideal input" prompted them to invite the parents into the planning for the new centre. Parents contributed to the design, putting forward ideas about what they would like for the new centre, talking about their own childhood and what they had liked as children, such as one mother reflecting on how much she had liked a little seat outside under the trees. By the end of the meeting, the parents and teachers had drawn up a "list of things that are important to include" and the Early Childhood Development co-ordinator prepared a design based on this. The parents and teachers shared the experience of thinking about children from the perspective of their own childhood, discussing the use of space in relation to the needs of their infants, toddlers, and young children, and working out a design to make a safe, attractive, and interesting environment for their children.

One way of encouraging parent involvement is by disestablishing the boundaries and rules that keep parents in a prescribed place. How do teachers respond when parents are late to pick up their child? Some project teachers questioned their negative reactions, looking for reasons from a parent's perspective: finding out about conflicting obligations that held greater weight, finding out why it was difficult to get to the centre on time. Finding out was revealing, helping teachers recognise obstacles for parents.

A kindergarten was inspired by the teachers' own analysis of their relationships with fathers, their recognition that they tended to hold back from initiating conversations with fathers, and their interest in this area of work because of the high number of fathers who were primary caregivers. They were also keen to try out some ideas they had read about and discussed from Pen Green. They undertook a stocktake of their environment, from a male perspective. They saw wall displays of mothers and children, but very few fathers, yet fathers were present on trips, in working bees, during sessions, at committee meetings, picking up their children and dropping them off, coming into the centre as workers – in all aspects of the life of the centre. They put photographs of men with their children on display. They changed the process of addressing parents on the induction letter so both parents were named:

It wasn't that we were being sexist. They just inadvertently excluded more than one person.

They signposted the toilet, which was hidden away through the staff room.

Working closely with parents in a multicultural kindergarten was challenging for the three Pākehā teachers who did not themselves have a lot of knowledge of the cultures of all their families. One teacher felt "hesitant and nervous" about approaching parents whose culture she did not understand; another recognised in herself a tendency to communicate less with parents who were not confident speakers of English. Teachers asked parents what they wanted within the kindergarten. By opening out and asking parents, they opened doors for parents' involvement too. Parents became resourceful in identifying significant celebrations and events, cooking and trying different foods in the kindergarten, building up cultural resource boxes, teaching and bringing in music and songs, making the kindergarten into an environment where their culture was visible.

There were spinoffs for teachers and parents alike:

- Teachers identified change in their practice: a greater ability to search out information, greater ease in discussing things with families that are hard to discuss, becoming more knowledgeable about cultural diversity and simply – but fundamentally – "more aware".
- Parents felt more comfortable and valued: at ease in making themselves at home in the kindergarten.

Responding to individual diversity

Each community had its unique characteristics and philosophy, and each family was unique. Teachers responded to individual diversity, recognising there is no formula for what families wanted in their involvement in the centre, or for what would work for all families in their relationships with them. There is not a pocketful of strategies that can be adopted.

The process of recognising difference within families was highlighted in the kindergarten that wanted to "involve fathers". "Fathers" are not all the same: fathers, like everyone else, have different experiences, feelings, perspectives, and values.

The teachers started their work by “shoulder-tapping” a father to help them arrange a fathers’ evening. In one of the early discussions with this father, teachers discovered his view that he wasn’t “a proper bloke” because he “did other things” that men didn’t usually do, and therefore regarded himself as unrepresentative of the group of fathers as a whole.

This experience and other experiences during the course of the project demonstrating difference among parents, helped teachers become more aware about their own assumptions and generalisations. Some of these experiences came from making mistakes and learning from these. One of the outcomes for these teachers was a greater awareness of their own gender-based attitudes and gender-based play by children in their kindergarten.

Meaningful communication with parents about the programme and curriculum enables teachers to build deeper knowledge and understanding of families, and this too seems to help teachers respond to diversity. A parent at one of the centres identified a sense of staff “making sure” for every child after the centre had worked over the year to more closely integrate action between home and centre about children’s learning.

Communicating with parents about children’s learning

The centres aimed to develop staff:parent communication that encouraged parents, teachers, and children to contribute to the curriculum and an inclusive learning community. Many of the communications between staff and parents were routine, or factual – letting each other know of events or giving information. But there was also a number of ways in which teachers and parents communicated that provided opportunity for parents (and children) to contribute to the curriculum. Carr (2001, p. 31)[Not in References] identifies one of the strengths of *Te Whāriki* as a permeable curriculum – open to contribution from all comers. It does not set out detailed criteria for assessment that are external, explicit, predetermined, and generalised.

Teachers found helpful ways of communicating so that parents could make meaningful contributions to the curriculum, taking part in discussions about the meaning of children’s learning.

Teachers at one site used video to capture the flavour of what was happening at the centre. They used it to identify learning they saw as valuable and to explain what they do to support and extend it. This followed on from parent feedback in the research interviews that the parents wanted to know about what their children were learning, about what was actually happening at the centre during the day, and why. Parents, children, and wider family members were highly interested in the video showings. Later, the professional development adviser and head teacher also tried adding text to “story” still frames from some of the video episodes. A commentary was added identifying learning the staff saw as valuable. This material went up on display in the hope it would prompt some fruitful revisiting by parents/children/staff. The visual documentation worked well in this centre.

Thinking in new ways about parents’ contribution to curriculum led these teachers to question their traditional approach to programme planning, which was to develop an individual education programme from *Te Whāriki* strands for each child, invite the parent to a meeting, and tell the parent what the teacher had planned for the child and inviting comment. In order to try to enable equal partnerships and a more active role in determining the planning direction, they decided to ask parents to contribute directly to the planning.

Over time the system has become teachers working with parents individually, showing and discussing *Te Whāriki* goals in relation to the child and developing a programme from this discussion in which each party contributed their knowledge of the child:

This resulted in a collaborative result, an Individual Educational Programme which was based on parental and staff observations.... The parents had very clear ideas about what they wanted from the teachers regarding their children. The suggestions flowed and the results were excellent. (Teacher)

The initial development of the Individual Educational Programme was followed up with a parent meeting where parents discussed with staff how they thought their child went through the planned experiences and how these met up with the goals they had developed together. A spinoff for teachers from having to explain the curriculum to parents was to deepen their own understanding.

One parent described her experience:

They come to ask us 'Is there anything you want your child to learn?' And they listen and they do it and we get to see it in their profile books.

The experience helped this parent feel valued:

Because nobody has ever asked me you know what I would like for her. To be learning. Usually they just do it and say she's done this and this and this. So it was a shock when [the head teacher] came and asked me 'What do you think would be a good idea for Hinehou?'

It also made her more keen to ask teachers for ideas about what she could do at home.

Integrating action between home and centre

There is considerable evidence that children benefit when the home and early childhood centre build on and support each other in the interests of children. Some teachers came into the project with a prime interest in finding ways to acknowledge and extend children's home experiences and learning within the centre. They were interested in showing the learning and experiences in the centre so that parents could build on the centre's work as well. Integrating action between centre and home in the interests of children was a goal.

In a community creche, the supervisor was convinced that teachers should build on parents' knowledge of their own children in the early childhood programme and in interactions with children. He thought the practice of parents and teachers reflecting on their work together "builds esteem for parents, teachers, and children and enables their strengths to be used". He regarded open communication as fundamental to building effective relationships and thought parents' points of view are as valuable as professionals'.

My interviews with parents showed that these creche parents regarded teachers' relationships with them and their children very positively. Parents were involved during session time at least twice a term as parent helps, and parents were regularly contributing to the programme. The supervisor described the working relationship as one where every idea is valued and taken on board. Teachers were not seeking radical change, but they wanted to "hook parents in" even more.

Teachers collaborated with parents from the beginning in determining the direction for the project. Their first action was a curriculum evening, where a video of children at the creche was shown, teachers described their pedagogical approach, I as researcher presented issues from the initial research interviews and described the research project, and parents discussed their approach to the project and what they would like their creche to focus on. Parents conveyed a clear interest in knowing more about children's learning, knowing how parents could contribute to learning at home, and knowing more about how teachers plan for children's learning.

Discussion of planning revealed different views about curriculum: one parent wanted a curriculum plan to be written at the beginning of term setting out what was to happen each day of the term; another wanted his child's deficits to be the focus of teacher attention, because these were the areas that he said needed to be worked on. These ideas, although often going against the beliefs of teachers, were accepted as valid and discussed: the idea of a plan each term was transformed through discussion into a decision to highlight examples through photographic documentation in order to track the emergent curriculum in an area or topic of interest as it progressed, and make the planning process explicit. Parents' ideas were shown respect.

In the past, this centre had already held workshops with parents about children's schema and parents said their understanding of schema was very valuable for making sense of their child's interests and behaviour. Teachers used the parent feedback to set an overall aim of enabling parents to be more involved in planning and discussion about their child. One of the several actions taken by the creche was to encourage greater dialogue about learning through getting parents to video children at the creche; parents to collect information about their own child's and other children's learning when they were parent helping and to put it in their child's portfolio; and parents to observe their child at home and bring their observations to the creche.

Some parents took up the opportunity to use *parent help* times to document and assess their own child's and other children's learning, and collect information for their child's portfolio. More parents are bringing documented observations from home although there has not been a "flood" of this. All home documentation is discussed in the fortnightly staff planning meetings. Here is an example of how documentation from home is used and how a parent perceives this. On this occasion the supervisor collected the documentation himself, but said the same process can be followed with parents documenting home experiences:

Anne³'s was one family I did some home observations with. And I also did some photographs of her collecting up stones and putting them in bags, demonstrating enclosure schema I suppose.... This photographic documentation from home went into her portfolio, and we also managed to...follow that interest at creche, photograph and document it and build on that interest.

From the point of view of Anne's mother, the teachers' work in involving parents in these ways is highly valued:

I felt inspired after the meeting [curriculum meeting] I came to. As a parent without a doubt they value my input and are interested in finding out about home life.

She went on to describe a home observation that she had done, and how her knowledge of schema and understanding helped her be more accepting of her child's play:

She's really big into mud pies. It treks through the house – water and sand. She's very involved in construction and rolling things, making things wet and rolling them up into balls. Neat little balls like those large balls of soap. And she lines them up on the rocks around the surrounding edges of our sandpit.

Did getting to understand schema help you in any way to understand how you could extend her?

Oh yes. It has. Very much with Anne because she has been very much a classic child to slot. My eldest one wasn't so easy to read. But it has certainly been very helpful in understanding a child's development so you don't frustrate that

³ Anne's name is fictitious to protect the child's privacy

development. You don't get conflict... Anne will be the dirtiest, messiest child at creche but I don't really care.... Today for example there was another three pieces of sticking plaster applied to my daughter's anatomy and Bob was quite concerned. But I said 'If she fell off the wall, she fell off the wall. She didn't crack anything open. She's fine. She's learnt to hold on tighter.'

She had also used the video camera during parent help and noticed that the children liked to watch this and talk about their play:

I've certainly focused when I've been parent helping on things that the children have been doing. There was one incident when I was parent helping when the children made a train out of boxes. There were some children in this train with newspapers. Obviously they had seen people on the train reading newspapers, and they had their papers out like this as if they were London commuters. And there was another child who was very much into connecting the chains. And he had these chains strung around for miles, around the circumference of the fort. As a parent I just took the video.... And the children love watching themselves at mat time. We created a mat time which I think is a good thing. It quietens them down before lunch. (Mother)

Over the period of the project, changes were evident to each party involved in the creche:

- Parents identified more in-depth communication about their child's learning, more awareness of how they could help their child at home, and they felt more valued. One parent noticed a more united staff team.
- Teachers identified they were able to reflect home experiences more in the work of the creche, spent more time talking with parents about their child's interests and discussing observations, used video to communicate with external agencies such as Group Special Education for planning purposes, felt communication with parents was more meaningful and were able to use parents' views and knowledge in planning, assessment, and learning experiences. Teachers were better able to support children's interests. There was a greater sense of working as a team.
- The professional development adviser identified a more proactive partnership, more input from the child at home, and a more cohesive staff team.

Principles for centres to find their own direction

Each centre found their own direction in response to its own community. Each generated a focus on their own goals, developing their own ways of reaching them. There were commonalities, however, in the processes and characteristics of their approaches that enabled centres to strengthen relationships with parents, and I see four principles that are emerging from analysis of the case studies.

Goals reflected the centre philosophy and community profile

What centres chose to work on reflected the make-up of their community and the challenges for those teachers and parents in that community to work in partnership. There was often a deep articulated belief in the philosophy of the centre and the place of parents as partners, coming through in interviews with both teachers and parents, especially when parents had established the centre themselves as a parent co-operative or community creche. One of the most significant discussions in a co-operative education and care centre was at a workshop to discuss parents' aspirations for their children and their beliefs about what they wanted in the centre, as well as other agenda items. This discussion of values and philosophy was so engrossing that the other agenda items had to be wiped. The process of generating the centre's philosophy continued with parents working at home to collate and bring together the ideas from the meeting. These parents were really interested in these big questions.

The make-up of the community and challenges for that community were the starting point for centres in the process of making change. Finding that starting point could take time and effort. A turning point sometimes came when teachers and parents worked together to determine their combined goals for their partnership. Some starts were made and later abandoned when teachers tried an approach that did not work in the way they expected, and their analysis showed their own assumptions about what would work for parents was discrepant with what parents showed they wanted.

Here is an example of the enlightenment happening when a workshop teachers had planned for parents was poorly attended. Teachers were disappointed at the low turnout. While they could have blamed this on the weather, or the timing, or lack of interest by parents, instead they asked themselves some critical questions:

- Who was this experience for?
- Was it for staff or parents?
- How did it change our thinking?

Teachers concluded that:

We chose the topic thinking we knew what they wanted, and we expected them to follow our lead. Perhaps we should have conferred with parents and let them make the decision. Perhaps we should have asked them that simple question 'What do you want from us?' In saying this I believe we have become more reflective as practitioners. (Joint presentation by teachers)

From this experience, we found it was not the parents who needed to change but ourselves as teachers. (Teacher)

Evident in this example is the willingness of teachers to look critically at their own thinking and practice, working from a credit base. The experience and insight led these teachers to take new directions, focusing on parents' primary interest in their own child, and finding ways to work together on that interest.

Teachers investigated relationships, communications, and practices within their own setting

Investigating relationships, communications, and practices within their own setting was an important element of each centre's work. Teachers found their own path that worked well for those teachers and parents, in that context, at that time. Teachers used a variety of tools to find out what parents thought and wanted:

- a lunch and parent meeting to discuss parents' views of important issues that had emerged in initial research interviews;
- a survey of parents;
- use of initial research interviews to highlight issues; and
- discussion of the research project and parents' views in an evening meeting.

There was a very powerful impact for both parents and teachers from teachers trying to find out parents' views, or actively seeking and asking for them. Parents felt valued and became more involved when they were consulted, and when their ideas were adopted.

When we were asked to give our ideas, we were just feeling we were involved in decision making of the kind. That's one way we feel valued. They can

choose[?] 'Don't you do this?' Because the European is the mainstream culture.
We are the minority but we were invited to come. (Chinese father)

Investigations helped teachers find a direction or confirmed their current pathway was working well.

There was a critical edge in teachers' discussions with professional development advisers, and this seemed to help teachers to want to create new practices or modify existing ones where current practices did not work well.

The impact of working in partnership was wider than the focus
In each of the centres changed practices in working with parents were created and these were evident to all parties: teachers, parents, and the professional development advisers. While the focus of the action taken by teachers and parents was often confined, there was a ripple effect from building relationships and working more closely with parents.

Working with professional development advisers was a critical support
All the teachers said they benefited from the professional development, and the descriptions of the work that was done with the professional development adviser and the influences of this on their pedagogical practice, showed its value.

The professional development advisers all worked intensively with centre teachers as a team, sometimes taking on a hands-on role within the centre, videoing interactions and/or taking part in parent meetings. In one centre the professional development adviser also did additional work behind the scenes with the head teacher editing videos. The role of the professional development advisers in the teachers' journeys can be summarised as follows:

- helping teachers to focus, offering direction and clarifying issues – helping teachers “see the wood for the trees”;
- providing ideas about other ways of doing things – “things we hadn't thought of”. These ideas came from stimulating reading, and practices the professional development adviser thought about or suggested from other centres;
- helping teachers with tools to investigate their practice, e.g. ways to collect data at a parent meeting, use of video within the centre;
- challenging teachers and “having an outsider looking in”; and
- providing reassurance that teachers were on the right track.

The process of working together with the professional development adviser contributed to team cohesion and development of shared values. In one centre, both parents and teachers identified the teachers were working from a more united position in planning and assessment following the professional development. Working with a professional development adviser who was herself a highly knowledgeable and skilled early childhood teacher was affirming and encouraging. Some teachers dared to try new things from this base of support:

It gave me the courage to extend myself and go to places I didn't think I would.
A year ago I wouldn't have believed it. (Head teacher)

These professional development adviser roles that were valued by teachers are consistent with a best evidence synthesis Pam Cubey and I have recently completed of the characteristics of professional development that are linked to enhanced pedagogy and children's learning in early childhood education settings (Mitchell & Cubey, in publication).

Working in this project where pedagogy is held up for public consideration led to teachers feeling “more valued” because they were part of the research and professional development. Some were better able to counter negative public valuing of their work and more willing to debate the worth of early childhood teaching. Being involved in a network with others contributed to a sense of excitement and enabled teachers to learn from each other.

The importance of supportive conditions

The case studies highlighted constraints under which teachers worked. Teachers in education and care centres who did not have generous amounts of non-contact time operated in conditions that made it hard for them to have time to spend together as a team in analysis, critical reflection, assessment, and planning. Often their meetings took place after 5.00pm when they were tired from a day’s work, and were rationed according to centre budgets. Individual work in developing portfolios often took place in teachers’ own time. Yet these centres were employed under the best multi-employer collective agreement in New Zealand (Consenting Parties’ Collective Agreement) and their conditions are superior to those of many other teachers. The poor staff child ratios of 1:15 in kindergartens and large group sizes made it hard for kindergarten teachers to establish meaningful relationships with every family. These points were also made by parents in their interviews.

Another demonstrated need is for all teachers to have access to tools to support documentation. For example, the powerful role of video recording was evident, but without a video recorder on hand, teachers had to confine their videoing to prescribed times.

Professional development was rationed: some teachers thought they would have benefited from more professional development time, more intensive professional development, or a continuance of the professional development related to relationships with parents. This cannot be guaranteed under a system that apportions professional development for limited duration in yearly contracts.

Parents found the burden of fundraising the thing they liked least about their involvement in the centre. Many commented on the need for better governmental financial support, which would free them for the work they liked in the centre: the communications they valued about their own child’s learning and development, about the programme and the early childhood curriculum, and the opportunities they had to converse and mix with other parents and teachers.

What is evident from these case studies is the value of professional development support for teachers to work collaboratively with each other and in partnership with parents, and the role that government agencies can play in supporting such work. There was enormous energy and vitality that created for me a great sense of excitement. This was a project that captivated the imaginations of many of us. It was based on simple principles and relationships – respect and dialogue.

No reira, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

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