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# Centre–parent communication about children’s learning

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The effects of teaching practice on parents’ participation in their child’s early education were studied by drawing on a “collective case” of five education and care centres with 100 percent qualified teachers and a “collective case” of centres employing 50–79 percent qualified teachers. The research found noticeable gaps between parents’ aims for their child’s learning before school and the content of the information shared by early childhood teaching staff with parents and whānau in children’s portfolios. The two categories of centres differed in the nature and extent of their communication about children’s interests and programme planning to parents and whānau.

## The context: New Zealand early childhood education

New Zealand, for about 5 years, was in a unique situation when government grants were at a level that made it possible for education and care centres to employ 100 percent qualified teachers. The funding level was introduced in 2005 as part of a 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 2002). (The *Funding Manual* can be accessed at [www.lead.ece.govt.nz](http://www.lead.ece.govt.nz).) Higher funding was made available to incentivise centres to reach the target of 100 percent qualified teachers. By 2010–11, the majority of centres had reached the 80 percent target, and a minority of centres met the criteria for 100 percent qualified teacher funding. In its Budget in May 2010, the Government announced that it would cease funding at the 100 percent level and the top subsidy would be that paid to centres with 80+ percent qualified teachers.

When a study of teachers’ work in education and care centres in the 100 percent qualified teachers funding band and centres with 50–79 percent qualified teachers was undertaken in 2011 by Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa/ NZ Childcare Association (NZCA) (Meade et al., 2012), the researchers included a question about parent/whānau participation using measures to do with centre–parent communication.

## Some relevant literature

A report by Early Childhood Australia (2009) states that qualified staff lift the quality of early education, *inter alia*, by the interactions and partnerships with parents. Other research literature shows that qualified teachers are associated with improved quality learning environments and positive outcomes for children (see, for example, Munton et al., 2002; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010). The United States National Institute for Child Health and Development (NICHD) (2003) longitudinal study found that all the elements of quality early education were associated with centres where staff held early childhood teacher qualifications.

When parents and teachers collaborate in centres, both parties develop better understanding of the values and mores of (a) the centre and (b) the families’ homes and community. Children’s early education becomes more of a shared endeavour and learner centred; and a centre can become a *community of learners* (Te One, 2012). Children’s “competence ... also depends on how much the knowledge, skills and interests children acquire from their families and communities are recognised and valued by educators within EC settings” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 7). Communication is a key factor in parent participation: for enhancing learning outcomes (Sylva et al., 2010) and children’s and parents’

lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Whalley & the Pen Green Centre Team, 2001); and giving parents a sense of belonging (Meade et al., 2012). Barbara Rogoff (1998) coined the phrase “transformation of participation” to describe sociocultural learning when people develop their thinking and behaviour through a shared activity in ways that shape their involvement in similar cultural (educational) activities in the future (Fleer & Robbins, 2006). Chris Athey (2007) talked about transformation of parents’ participation this way:

Nothing gets under the skin more quickly and more permanently than the illumination of his or her child’s behaviour. The effect of participation can be profound. (p. 209)

## Parent participation

Some of the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) clearly point to the importance of staff connecting with family and whānau about their child’s interests, learning and development: the *Family and Community/Whānau Tangata* and *Relationships/Ngā Hononga* principles woven through the *Belonging/Mana Whenua* and *Communication/Mana Reo* strands.

The introduction to the *Family and Community* principle states:

The wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum ... Children’s learning and development are fostered if ... there is strong connection and consistency among all aspects of the child’s world. The curriculum builds on what children bring to it and makes links with the everyday activities and special events of families, whānau, local communities and cultures ...

New Zealand is the home of Māori language and culture: curriculum in early childhood settings should promote te reo and ngā tikanga Māori, making them visible and affirming their value for children from all cultural backgrounds. Adults working with children ... should respect the aspirations of parents and families for their children. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 42)

Calls for stronger connections between home and centre emanated from Bronfenbrenner’s

human development theory (1979), which is very visible in *Te Whāriki*. Two research projects in England influenced the centre–home aspect of our research: Margy Whalley and the Pen Green Centre team’s research, and the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al., 2010).

The EPPE research provided quantitative confirmation that parent involvement in their child’s early education has positive benefits long term for children’s learning:

The findings showed that good outcomes for children were linked to settings that ...

- Had strong parental involvement, especially in terms of shared educational aims with parents
- Provided informative feedback to children during activities and provided regular reporting and discussion with parents about their child’s progress. (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010, pp. 161–162)

## Methodology

In 2010, NZCA decided it was important to study centres that were receiving the 100 percent grant until 1 February 2011, and compare them with centres with fewer qualified teachers. The research question related to this article was: What features of education and care centres with 100 percent qualified teachers and centres with 50–79 percent qualified teachers have positive (or negative) effects on family participation? The researchers’ interest in family participation in early childhood education (ECE) was not in terms of attendance; rather it was in terms of parent participation in educational activities connected to their child’s ECE. We wondered: Can teacher practice in education and care centres influence parent participation in ECE? Can it transform participation in ways that may shape parent involvement in their child’s education in the future? How were parents/whānau and teachers connecting in their endeavours to strengthen the child’s learning?

A mixed-method project was designed to address research questions related to early childhood teachers’ work and the effects of their practice on children’s learning and family participation. The design was a “collective case” (Wellington, 2000) of five centres with 100 percent of their regulated staff being qualified teachers, and the “collective case” of five centres employing 50–79 percent qualified

teachers. The 10 centres across Aotearoa New Zealand were randomly selected from Ministry of Education ECE databases (stratified by location, levels of qualified teachers, bicultural approaches and the enrolment of both toddlers and young children).

Field work took place in the first 4 months of 2011. Data gathering at each site involved:

- ratings of quality early education based on observations of interactions and the environment
- interviews with staff about their philosophy, a day in the life of the centre for teachers and children, deployment of qualified and unqualified staff, planning and assessment and communication with families
- interviews with parents of 10 sample children per centre about their ECE aims for their child and communication about their child with the centre staff
- time-interval observations of these 10 children’s interactions with teaching staff
- assessments of the sample children’s learning outcomes, by the teacher who knew each child best using a social-profile tool (Hogan, Scott, & Bauer, 1992) and assessment narratives framed by *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, Book 16, 2009) and *Te Whatu Pōkeka* (Ministry of Education, 2009)
- a review of the portfolios of sample children to find out more about parent–centre communication
- document analysis of centre documents.

Most of the findings shared in this article come from our analyses of interviews with staff and parents (for example, the data about shared educational aims/aspirations for the children) and the content analysis of the children’s portfolios.

A brief comment about the contexts may be helpful. In analysing the quality ratings, we found that the 100 percent centres were consistently rated above the mid-point on almost all the variables of quality, whereas the 50–79 percent centres were mid-point or below. As well, four of the five 100 percent centres had made provision for parents to stay at the centre if they wanted to, whereas parents in three of the five 50–79 percent centres were not able to do this.

## Research findings

### Communication about shared educational aims for the children

During interviews the researchers asked the 10 sample parents and the teaching staff in each

centre how parents told staff what they hoped their children would learn during their early education by the time they started school. All centres and almost all parent interviewees said that informal conversations at drop-off and pick-up times were the most common times when aims could be shared. Almost all centres mentioned an enrolment form, some of which included explicit questions about parents' aspirations for their child.

In addition, the five centres with 100 percent qualified teachers had systems that meant relationships were deeper and communication was more frequent, as evidenced by a primary caregiver/key teacher system and/or use of email or a centre blog to enhance communication. This use of ICT greatly enhanced the curriculum at the 100 percent centres; their teachers could "build on what children bring to it and makes links with the everyday activities and special events of families, whānau, local communities" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 42). That use of electronic communication and the primary caregiving systems increased the opportunities for teachers to discuss parents' aims for their child as well as strengthening staff-family relationships.

Some centres in both categories had occasions annually when parents were formally asked about their aims for their child in the months ahead. Two 100 percent centres and three centres with fewer qualified teachers had formal events to speak with parents about their aspirations.

Thematic analysis of the parents' aims for their child's early education was undertaken. Four main themes emerged. Parents wanted their child to gain:

1. a positive disposition to learning
2. social skills
3. early literacy and numeracy knowledge
4. strengthened cultural identity and te reo Māori.

The first three aims were expressed by a large majority of parents. Examples of dispositional aspirations included: "Be exploring and outgoing", and "I want him to be engaging in dialogue and thinking."

Social skills were often mentioned by parents when asked about their educational aims. For example: "Learns to make friends, how to treat others ... share", and "Be able to mix with diverse people."

Before starting school, many parents wanted their child to have gained some literacy and number knowledge. Some talked in terms of concepts, not simply rote learning of the alphabet: "To have a good vocabulary and knowledge of types of words so she can make connections with reading and writing."

Some 4-year-old children had already fulfilled the literacy aims of their parents. For example: "The centre has already helped [child] learn some literacy basics such as recognising letters of the alphabet." Others said explicitly that they did not expect their child to be an emergent reader before school.

The fourth theme in the aspirations was more visible in the responses of parents in the two bicultural centres: "More te reo Māori", and "It's important that she understands her identity—being Māori." *Ka Hikitia* (Ministry of Education, 2008) reflects this aim of Māori whānau. It stresses the importance of productive relationships amongst teachers, Māori learners, whānau and iwi for strengthening Māori language and culture. "Effective teaching and learning [is] based on reciprocal relationships and incorporating the people and contexts of children's wider lives" (p. 21).

TABLE 1. PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION RELATING TO AIMS FOR CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Centres with 100 percent qualified teachers	Centres with 50–79 percent qualified teachers
Systems	Annual occasions
Primary caregiver system	Parent/whānau evenings once each term
Regular email/blog communication	New Year "welcome back" form asking about parents' aspirations for the year
Annual occasions	"Aspirations" white-board set up in the entrance at the beginning of each year
Parent-child session once each term	
Personalised interviews with parents	

TABLE 2. PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION RELATING TO PROGRAMME PLANNING

Centres with 100 percent qualified teachers	Centres with 50–79 percent qualified teachers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff in all five centres described planning systems in considerable detail</li> <li>• All five centres displayed their programme plans on a wall for parents</li> <li>• All five centres discussed in planning meetings what they had observed and/or their analysis of children's Learning Stories</li> <li>• Four centres exchanged emails with parents, including ideas for the programme; one used a blog</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff in these five centres spoke about planning in less detail</li> <li>• One centre was involved in professional development to develop planning processes</li> <li>• Four centres displayed Learning Stories for parents, not necessarily with programme planning in mind</li> <li>• No centre exchanged emails with parents to help gather ideas for the programme</li> <li>• More parents said, "Not really", re being invited to share the child's home interests</li> </ul>

### Communication of child's interests and programme planning

Teaching staff in all 10 centres said that they talked to parents about their child's interests at drop-off and/or pick-up time. Parents who attended centre events and/or helped with excursions said they talked on those days too. We found that the 100 percent centres had capacity and capability to communicate with parents and whānau using ICT and frequently did so via email, blogs and so on, and these exchanges were frequently about:

We use email; the teachers send us something daily about what she's been doing, which helps with knowing what questions to ask at home. [Parent interviewee]

When the two categories of centres were compared, there were differences in the themes in their interview data. The comparisons are summarised in Table 2. The 100 percent centres' data demonstrated that the teaching team had considerably more professional knowledge about curriculum, planning and assessment and could explain the theories underpinning their practice. The use of e-communication was transforming participation of parents in their children's early education.

When we asked parents if they had been asked about their child's interests at home, or if they had contributed to planning the programme, many of them could not remember doing more than telling staff about their weekend, or holidays. The take-up after parents told teaching staff about their child's interests varied. One parent expressed delight about their centre inviting a relative with his jet-ski after she described her child's interest in water activities. In contrast, a mother recalled telling the centre that her son played musical instruments at home but there had been no follow-up.

Communication from the centre took many forms. All 10 centres made a portfolio for each child (also known as a profile book). Various other written formats were used: daily notebooks for infants detailing food, bottles, sleep times; newsletters; wall notices; and, in 100 percent centres only, frequent emails or blogs. A few interviewees—all from centres with 50–79 percent qualified teachers—expressed dissatisfaction about their centre's communication. For example, a parent said more information was shared about small accidents than about their child's learning; and another was disappointed with the few entries in her child's portfolio.

Generally, the portfolios we reviewed contained samples of children's art or "mark making", some centre material (e.g., the philosophy statement, photos of the teachers and an outline of *Te Whāriki*) and content in the form of Learning Stories. Carr (2001) proposed Learning Stories as narratives of learning where learning progression become obvious, but in reality many staff wrote simple anecdotes. The fuller portfolios appealed to most parents, whānau and children:

The books [portfolios] are fantastic. They can be picked up and taken home—a great way of communicating. [Parent interviewee]

They send home work that he has done in his profile book. We enjoy that and give it to his grandmother. [Parent interviewee]

A frequent commendation was parents found out about their child's interests and what they did during the day by reading them. Parents said they love to take them home and read them with their child and talk about the experiences shown.

Written communication takes time, usually away from children. Tasks undertaken in "noncontact time" include adding Learning Stories to portfolios, wall documentation,

planning and communicating with families. Two hours per week was the norm; with the range in the 10 centres being 1 hour to 4 hours per week per staff member. There was an association between more qualified teachers, the capacity for written communication and the time available as well as the capability (qualifications) of staff to assess learning and write rich narrative Learning Stories.

The research team analysed the portfolios of the sample children to learn more about centre-home communication. The nature of the entries was analysed and the results are shown in Table 3.

There was a marked difference in the two categories of centres, with two-thirds of the children in the 100 percent centres having portfolios filled mostly with rich narratives of learning, whereas only a handful of portfolio entries in centres with fewer qualified teachers were classified in this way. In the centres with 50–79 percent qualified staff, the majority of children had portfolios containing short anecdotes with no analysis of learning or with photos with captions. These results indicate a lower capacity to write learning narratives in the latter category of centres. Our theory is the contrasting picture presented about the two categories of centres by the portfolios has a bearing on parent participation. For teachers, and for parents who reciprocate, portfolios full of rich narratives of learning signify transformation of participation.

Not all the portfolios were in the centre the week the researcher analysed them, and some had little added to the portfolio because most records were sent home electronically. For these reasons, comparison of quantities of entries was not reliable. However, general patterns emerged. Unless a 100 percent centre mostly communicated about children's learning electronically, these centres' portfolios had

more entries (one researcher felt compelled to count portfolio entries in a 100 percent centre and found one contained 80 entries!) than portfolios from centres with 50–79 percent qualified teachers. As well, more of entries in 100 percent centres were personalised for the child (as compared with stories of group activities), and more of them included some parent contributions and some links (dialogues) between parent and teaching staff contributions.

### Parent contributions to portfolios

Most centres invite parents and whānau to add to their child's portfolio, with spaces indicated for their contributions. A summary matrix of what was found from this review is provided below. Note the caveat about missing data (see above).

In one of the centres with 50–79 percent qualified staff, no parents contributed anything to their child's portfolio, and two more centres only had the minimal contribution of a pepeha and/or enrolment form typically known as the "All about Me" form. One centre in this category stood out as being different: the teaching staff prepared more portfolio entries and a number of them contained some rich narratives. As a consequence of the nature and extent of staff entries, the parent response there was stronger than in any other centre with fewer qualified teachers.

### Portfolio content that connects with parents' aims for their child's early education

When designing the research instruments, the researchers predicted some of the aspirations of parents. Two aspects of learning that were included in the review of portfolios connected with the themes in the parent interviews:

- children's emergent literacy and mathematical knowledge
- children's use of te reo me ōna tikanga Māori.

TABLE 3. NATURE OF PORTFOLIO ENTRIES BY LEVELS OF QUALIFIED STAFF

Staff qualifications	100 percent qualified teachers	50–79 percent qualified teachers
	Percentage of children's portfolios (n=45)	Percentage of children's portfolios (n=48)
Predominantly anecdotes	10	68
Mix of anecdotes and rich narratives	24	29
Predominantly rich narratives of learning	66	3
	100	100

TABLE 4. PARENT AND TEACHER CONTRIBUTIONS TO PORTFOLIOS

100 percent qualified <i>Pattern of parent and staff contributions</i>	50–79 percent qualified <i>Pattern of parent and staff contributions</i>
In the 45 portfolios reviewed, 20 of the parents contributed, and in three centres some parents contributed multiple times.  The large majority of the parents who contributed described their child’s interests at home.	In the 48 portfolios reviewed, 21 of the parents contributed, half of which were only the “All about Me” form or the child’s pepeha. <sup>1</sup> In one centre, four parents contributed multiple times.  Three parents described their child’s interests at home.
Teacher entries ranged from one per week to one per month.  There were also regular (often weekly) email exchanges per family or information on a blog.	Staff entries ranged from one per month to less often.  There were no email exchanges with any families about child learning.
Fifteen portfolios had a reciprocal dialogue between teachers and a parent about their child’s learning in their portfolio.	One parent had a reciprocal dialogue with teachers in their child’s portfolio.

As well, staff were asked to assess each sample child’s social behaviour (for example, in making friends).

### Emergent literacy and mathematics

The researchers drew on the last booklets in *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2009) for a framework to examine older children’s use of symbol systems, including written literacy. The child assessments included this framework, and a shorter version was part of the portfolio review template. The symbol systems were literacy, mathematics, the arts and ICT. Note that data from portfolios say as much or more about what practitioners choose to document as they do about the child’s active participation.

Table 5 indicates that children shown engaged with the arts were visible in a large

majority of the portfolios we studied. ICT use was documented far less often; and literacy and mathematics were in between.

The pattern seen in the table is consistent: for each symbol system, a higher proportion of the children in centres in the 100 percent qualified teachers’ category had at least one item in their portfolio illustrating their engagement with it.

The percentage point difference between the categories was most marked for literacy, with just over half the children in the centres with fewer qualified teachers having items showing them engaged in literacy activities compared with nearly three-quarters in the 100 percent centres. This finding reflects the quality ratings data for the 50–79 percent centres, which showed that these centres seldom had print-rich environments, nor were children being encouraged to engage in mark making and

TABLE 5. CHILDREN’S USE OF SYMBOL SYSTEM AS SHOWN IN THEIR PORTFOLIOS BY LEVEL OF QUALIFIED STAFF

	100 percent qualified teachers Percentage of children’s portfolios (n=45)	50–79 percent qualified teachers Percentage of children’s portfolios (n=48)
The arts	91.4	87.5
Oral and written literacy	74.3	56.3
Mathematics	68.6	60.4
ICT	22.9	18.8

TABLE 6. VISIBILITY OF TIKANGA ME TE REO MĀORI IN THE CHILDREN’S PORTFOLIOS

100 percent qualified teachers		50–79 percent qualified teachers	
Percentage of children’s portfolios showing		Percentage of children’s portfolios showing	
Use of te reo Māori	5	Use of te reo Māori	5
Tikanga whakaaro	11	Tikanga whakaaro	15

similar literacy activities throughout the day (Meade et al., 2012).

The portfolio review template asked the researchers to differentiate between Learning Stories that showed the child observing and listening, say, in a group situation and Learning Stories depicting the child actively using symbols. In the 100 percent centres, just over half the children were shown at least once using the symbol systems in their portfolios as opposed to watching and listening. In the 50–79 percent centres’ portfolios, two-thirds of the children were shown at least once using symbol systems.

### Te reo me ōna tikanga Māori

*Te Whāriki* is clear that “curriculum in early childhood settings should promote te reo and ngā tikanga Māori, making them visible” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 42). A number of parent interviewees aspired to their child speaking more te reo and strengthening their cultural identity. The reviews of portfolios checked how centres included te reo Māori and children practising tikanga whakaaro. The results in Table 6 show that bicultural practices are not strongly evident in portfolios.

A higher percentage of children in the centres with 50–79 percent qualified teachers had Learning Stories in their portfolios that made tikanga whakaaro<sup>2</sup> visible, and there were more such Learning Stories in this category of centres thanks to the efforts of kaiako in the bicultural centre and other Māori staff in centres in this category of centres. These data in portfolios reflected three other sets of data that showed a stronger commitment to te ao Māori in the centres with fewer qualified teachers: the quality rating of tikanga me te reo Māori; the teacher assessments of children’s bicultural knowledge; and explicit planning each month for te reo me ōna tikanga Māori in the bicultural centre (Meade et al., 2012). Te reo and tikanga Māori were seldom visible except in centres where there was a Māori professional leader

### Children’s social skills

The teaching staff were also asked to assess the sample children on social-behavioural scales. Scores to do with co-operation and peer sociability for children in centres with 50–79 percent qualified teachers were slightly higher than the scores for children in the 100 percent centres. Developing children’s social skills was emphasised in the philosophy statements of these centres. Staff expressed discomfort to the researchers about using this inventory,

yet the aims expressed by parents during their interviews suggest many would welcome information of this sort.

## Conclusions

The study of teachers' work in centres with 100 percent qualified teachers compared with centres with 50–79 percent qualified staff revealed differences in the nature and extent of communication between centre and home, parent contributions about their child's interests that influenced curriculum planning, and portfolio documentation of children's learning.

Portfolios, and the Learning Stories in them, are important teaching tools for children to revisit their ECE experiences, to show parents what their children are learning and for parents and children to read together. Our analyses of portfolios showed a marked difference between the two categories of centres in the nature of the content: the majority of the teacher entries in the 100 percent centres were rich narratives of learning, whereas the majority in 50–79 percent centres were short anecdotes. Parents in the 100 percent centres were more likely to describe their child's interests and make more contributions per parent. There were far more portfolios in 100 percent centres with explicit links between entries by parents and teachers compared with the centres with fewer qualified staff.

When checking whether content in portfolios connected with the themes in the parents' educational aims for their children, we found more children in the 100 percent centres had at least one entry about their literacy or number learning, whereas more portfolios in the other centres made tikanga whakaaro visible.

Relationships and communication between adults in the settings of greatest importance to young children—their home and their ECE service—are known to be significant for children and families. This study of teachers' work in centres with 100 percent qualified teachers and centres with 50–79 percent qualified teachers found that teaching teams at the 100 percent case study centres demonstrated a greater capacity and capability to strengthen relationships with parents and to communicate information in writing about children's learning more often and in ways that transformed many parents' participation in education than did the 50–79 percent centres. These teams knew more about the children's wider lives to build into their curricula. They also engaged more parents in dialogues about what their child was learning day to day. The reciprocal dialogues in the 100

percent centres between teachers and parents by regular electronic communication and/or in rich narratives in children's portfolios demonstrated that education had become a shared endeavour in those settings, that they were learning centred.

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## Note

1. Pepeha: Commonly used in early childhood settings as a way of introducing oneself by giving a combination of one's mountain, river, waka, iwi or hapū, marae and name.
2. Tikanga whakaaro: Māori customs/concepts.

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