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Connecting curriculum and policy to assist families' aspirations

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Abstract

Te Whāriki, New Zealand's early childhood national curriculum, is strongly underpinned by sociocultural and ecological theories of development that recognise the significance of families in children's lives. There are, however, very few national policies that support the holistic nature of the curriculum. In 2006, the first significant recognition by government of the potential for early childhood centres to assist the holistic well-being of a community occurred. A pilot programme was launched that awarded Parent Support and Development contracts to early childhood centres in vulnerable communities. Eight centres took part in the pilot.

This paper reports on the impact of a Parent Support and Development contract on a kindergarten ecosystem, highlighting ways in which the ecological systems of the community were strengthened.

Introduction

Te Whāriki, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, is underpinned by the ecological theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (Ministry of Education, 1996; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development suggests our world consists of five systems (micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronosystems) and that the interactions between these systems offer a diversity of options for growth. These systems are multi-layered with the microsystem being the context in which the individual actively participates in "patterns of activities, roles and interpersonal relationships in a setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). Such settings include home, early childhood centre, school or workplace, with the mesosystem being the interrelations between two settings of active participation, for example, home and early childhood centre. The exo and macrosystems are further removed from the individual but still have a direct impact on the individual's capacity to be a competent, contributing member of society. Aspects of the exo and macrosystems would include community groups, religious affiliations as



well as policies about welfare, housing, education and health. The chronosystem is about time, not just time in relation to chronological age but specific periods when significant events or transitions may occur.

In response to this ecological model the curriculum explains the need to recognise the influences of these systems on children's learning. The principles of the curriculum, Holistic Development/*Kotahitanga*, Relationships/*Ngā Hononga*, Family and Community/*Whānau Tangata* and Empowerment/*Whakamana*, reflect the holistic and relational nature of children's development and learning. The view of the child as an active part of their micro and mesosystems acknowledges the significance of the physical, social, spiritual and emotional well-being of the child and those directly involved in their lives. These aspects of development and the relationships impacting on the child need to be acknowledged not only in pedagogical approaches but also in policy decisions. It is the policies influenced by the ideologies of the macrosystem and implemented in the exosystem that can have a significant impact on the micro and mesosystems of the child and their family.

Countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and the United States of America, although in the early stages of developing a national early childhood education curriculum, have well-established policies for children and families that recognise the interrelatedness of holistic well-being. These policies have more often than not been in response to severe cases of abuse or statistics that demonstrate high levels of underachievement, poverty and neglect. Recognition of the value of early intervention has led to policies being introduced. Generally these policies demand greater collaboration between services and structures to provide accessibility to a range of services for families and children. The *Sure Start* programme in the United Kingdom, designed to improve outcomes for children and families through integrated service provision, has resulted in the development of over 3,500 Children's Centres in 2010 (Department for Children, Schools & Family, 2010). This initiative began at a local level but was adopted nationally following the *Every Child Matters* green paper in 2003. Australia has also been developing the concept of integrated services over the past decade with a number of state initiatives (Australian Capital Territory Department of Education and Training, 2008; New South Wales Department of Community Services, 2009; Queensland Department of Education & Training, 2009) funding the implementation of integrated early childhood services. The *National Plan for Young Australians* and the United States national legislation *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) include collaboration between social services as a key aspect of these policies. In the majority of examples of integrated service provision, early childhood education and care is a feature but not necessarily the point of entry for families. Research about these services highlights the value for children and families in providing opportunities for families to engage in children's learning and enhance families' agency (Anning & Hall, 2008; Bertram et al., 2003; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Campbell, 2003; Draper & Duffy, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2009; Whalley, 2001).

In New Zealand the concept of 'integrated services', 'joined up services' or 'one-stop shops' is not common. Although national policy initiatives such as the *Agenda for Children* (Ministry of Social Development, 2002a), *Te Rito* New Zealand family violence strategy (Ministry of Social Development, 2002b), Child, Youth and Family's 'Working with Others' (2011), Child Matters (Child Protection Studies, n.d.) and *Strengthening Families* (Ministry of Social Development, 2005) support concepts of

integration and interagency collaboration, these do not necessarily include early childhood centres and certainly do not focus on the early childhood centre as the point of entry or frontline service. However, there have been a number of local initiatives where early childhood centres have collaborated with other agencies to provide a range of social services accessible from the early childhood centre. One study to date has explored these initiatives, reporting on the successes and challenges of 'integration' (Munford, Sanders, Maden, & Maden, 2007).

Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki, the 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education developed by the previous government to inform policy from 2002 to 2012, had as one of its goals, collaborative relationships. Underpinned by the importance of supporting and assisting families to realise their aspirations, this goal encompassed concepts of joined up or integrated services (Ministry of Education, 2002). In 2006 the New Zealand government launched a new initiative around parent support and family engagement in early childhood education and established a pilot project of Parent Support and Development (PS&D). This was the first significant recognition by government of the potential for early childhood centres to collaborate and partner with other agencies to support parents. This pilot awarded three-year contracts to eight early childhood centres located in areas meeting the vulnerability indicators of the Ministry of Social Development. Vulnerability indicators were established through the New Zealand Deprivation Index and included low income levels, high percentage of younger children, high percentage of Māori and Pasifika families, high percentage of people aged over 15 with no formal qualification, higher rates of unemployment and more single parent families.

The following year (before the pilot was completed and evaluated), a further 10 early childhood centres were awarded contracts. In 2009 the funding for this initiative was cut by a new government, which meant the latest contracts were terminated less than halfway through their funding round.

The Research

This paper uses data from a range of sources to describe the impact of a PS&D contract on a kindergarten ecosystem. One of the sources of data is from a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) contract from 2007 to 2009 entitled *Strengthening Responsive and Reciprocal Relationships in a Whānau Tangata Centre*. This TLRI explored the relationships between teachers, children and families and the impact of these relationships on families' engagement with their children's learning at this centre (Clarkin-Phillips & Carr, 2009). The research methodology for the TLRI was based on action research involving teachers as researchers alongside university researchers. Data was gathered from teachers' pedagogical documentation of children's learning and family responses to this documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants in a regular coffee morning held at the kindergarten. Some of the comments from these interviews have provided data for this paper along with the analysis of families' responses to teachers' documentation of children's learning.

Doctoral researcher observations in February 2012 have contributed information about the continuing connections within the kindergarten ecosystem post PS&D contract. These observations included descriptions of the number and activities of non-teaching adults present at the kindergarten every day for two weeks.

The research site

The kindergarten is located in an isolated area of a small provincial town in the lower North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. In 2006 the census data identified the town as having a greater proportion of vulnerability indicators per population than most other areas in New Zealand. The kindergarten is under the umbrella of a regional kindergarten association responsible for 63 kindergartens. The association provides such services as central administrative support, leadership and mentoring by an itinerant 'senior teacher', professional development opportunities, association-wide policy development, and capital works and maintenance projects to its kindergartens.

Kindergarten associations are bulk funded by the Ministry of Education through VOTE Education. The bulk fund is loosely based on cost drivers such as teacher salaries. Kindergarten teachers belong to the state sector and have a collective employment agreement negotiated by the Ministry of Education and the teachers union, NZEI Te Riu Roa. An amendment, in 2003, to the Education Act made it possible for unqualified teachers to be employed in kindergartens; however, the majority of teachers (96 percent) employed in kindergartens in 2006 were qualified and registered with the New Zealand Teachers Council. The Kindergarten Association in this study has a commitment to maintain 100 percent qualified teachers.

In 2006 the kindergarten had a sessional licence for 40 children to attend from 8.30am to 12.30pm every weekday morning and 30 children from 1.30 to 3.30pm three afternoons a week. Children attending the morning sessions were aged between three and five and those attending the afternoon were between two and three years of age. The teaching team consisted of three full-time teachers and one part-time (.6) teacher.

The Parent Support & Development (PS&D) project

The Parent Support and Development project was built on a rationale of research-based evidence of two generation programmes that combine parent education and support and early childhood education rather than solely parent-focused or child-focused programmes alone (Barrett, 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Research suggested that vulnerable parents are likely to access early childhood education services even when they are reluctant to access other agency services. The PS&D initiative sought to capitalise on this phenomenon by awarding contracts to universal early childhood centres to target a specific group: vulnerable parents. The objectives of the PS&D on which each participant centre designed their outputs were improving health, education and social outcomes for vulnerable children through effective parenting, building on parents' skills and knowledge, participation and engagement in early childhood education by vulnerable children and their families, development of connections and consistency between the child's learning at home and the early childhood education environment, and more effective connections between parents and broader social support and informal networks.

A number of initiatives were implemented at the kindergarten during 2006–2009 in order to meet these objectives but also to strengthen relationships with the community by being responsive to the aspirations of families. The kindergarten association and the teaching team chose to operate from a strengths-based approach and did not view the community as vulnerable. The decision was made to appoint the head teacher as the project co-ordinator as it was felt she was best placed to be a conduit between families

and the wider community. The head teacher as project co-ordinator was released from .7 of her full-time teaching role. At the onset of the project, two *kaimahi* (one Māori and one Tongan) were employed for 12 hours per week each to provide cultural and language support to the *pākehā* teachers. These *kaimahi* were women held in high regard amongst their communities.

Renovations were made to the kindergarten building to provide extra space for *whānau*¹-based activities. Most other initiatives of the project were at the suggestion or instigation of the kindergarten families. The project co-ordinator initially spent time introducing herself and the objectives of the project to a range of community agencies in order to establish relationships and grow awareness of the kindergarten's commitment to and capabilities for accommodating multi-agency collaboration.

Discussion

Strengthening connections between micro and mesosystems

Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that the stronger the connections between microsystems then the greater the potential for positive development. This concept is relevant to early childhood education and *Te Whāriki* emphasises the importance of building respectful and responsive relationships between teachers, children and their families. The principles of Holistic Development/*Kotahitanga* and Empowerment/*Whakamana* are particularly centred on the child in the immediate setting of the early childhood centre. Relationships/*Ngā Hononga* and Family and Community/*Whānau Tangata* encompass the mesosystem interrelationships to ensure that the child's microsystems of home and early childhood centre had strong links. These mesosystem interrelations featured in both the outcomes of the PS&D project and the philosophy of the kindergarten. Initiatives to strengthen families' understanding of their child's learning at kindergarten and to make connections with children's wider lives were developed by the teachers. These microsystem links were strengthened through pedagogical documentation in children's portfolios.

Children's Portfolios. The children's portfolios (a documented assessment record of their learning at kindergarten containing Learning Stories [Carr & Lee, 2012] and other examples of learning) contained a 'whānau voice' page. This page was intended for *whānau* to make comments about their child either in response to the Learning Stories or any general comments. Prior to the PS&D project the *whānau* voice sheet had seldom been utilised by families and the teachers were keen to increase participation and engagement. At the suggestion of their administrative worker (a young mother from the community employed for 12 hours a week), the *whānau* sheet was redesigned to make it 'friendlier' and more accessible. The teachers also decided to buy 'book bags', similar to those used in the junior classes of schools, and deliberately encourage the portfolios to go home with children. The response to systematically sending home the portfolios was significant. Within a month 37 out of 45 portfolios had *whānau* comments and the majority of the comments were about children's learning, progress, interactions and achievements.

The teachers continued to strengthen the connections with home through their documentation by writing down informal comments and conversations with *whānau* about children and adding these to the portfolios. Teachers wrote a response to *whānau* contributions, which encouraged dialogue about children—this was a strong indicator

of reciprocal relationships between home and kindergarten. Stories about children's activities in their wider lives were also displayed on the walls of the kindergarten and the practice of sending home a soft toy mascot and camera encouraged children to photograph 'Spotty Dog's' adventures with their family. This insight into children's lives provided teachers with the opportunities for making further connections between home and the kindergarten programme. It also was a positive reminder to families that their contributions were valued and appreciated. The appointment of a Samoan teacher was significant in building relationships with the Samoan community. The parents who spoke Samoan felt comfortable talking to the teacher without fear of being misinterpreted or misunderstood and they began to write their *fanau* contributions in Samoan. The practice of all teachers endeavouring to use some phrases of home languages (mostly Samoan or Tongan) in their documentation showed an ongoing commitment to strengthening the links of the children's micro and mesosystems.

The teachers wrote their own profiles to provide information about themselves to share with the families. These 'bio' sheets were placed near the front of the child's portfolio and were another attempt to make connections and assist in breaking down any perceived or real power imbalances between teachers and families.

Since the end of the PS&D project the portfolios have continued to play a significant role in strengthening relationships and are highly valued by children and their families. Researcher observations in March 2012 noted that on most days over a two-week period children and *whānau* members were seen at various times sitting looking at portfolios together. Portfolios also contained a variety of contributions from *whānau*, or teachers had documented their comments in stories.

Connecting meso and exosystems

Coffee/Play group. The curriculum principle of *Whānau Tangata*/Family and Community emphasises the significance of supporting the well-being of a child's family and the community they belong to. A child's learning and development is interdependent with the well-being of the adults who are responsible for them, hence opportunities to foster positive outcomes for families impacts positively on children.

One of the significant initiatives of the PS&D project to support families was a weekly coffee/playgroup. This event was instigated at the suggestion of the kindergarten administrator, who knew the community well and felt that this opportunity for young mothers, in particular, to meet together would be appreciated. The group was open to anyone, with or without children, and it was hoped that those with infants and toddlers would get to know the kindergarten community and feel comfortable about their children attending once they were on the kindergarten roll. Participants were asked for activity ideas and the project co-ordinator organised these with the relevant community groups and agencies. The ideas were many and varied, including reading to babies; quit smoking; cooking affordable, healthy meals; breast screening; asthma awareness; Christmas crafts; children's language development; and Family Start.

Coffee/Playgroup has been running for almost six years with attendance ranging from six to 15 participants of both genders. Finding out about services in the community and having the opportunity to connect and chat with someone from that service in a safe and comfortable environment helped these services be more accessible to families. Interviews with Coffee/Playgroup participants during the TLRI contract

demonstrated some of the positive effects of having this group and of parents and *whānau* feeling comfortable 'hanging around' at kindergarten.

I like coming to Playgroup, it gets me out of the house and I can bring my boy. I get to meet all the mums and I even get invited to their house. (Hinemoa)

I like the environment here and I like hanging out even though my children are all at school now. I've got five kids and so I don't get out to socialise as so socialising with parents you know we have things in common and it's nice to talk to other parents and other mothers. It makes you feel not so alone as well, 'cos sometimes you feel like "why are my children doing that?" but when you talk with other parents you clarify things.... And I like seeing how the teachers are positive and calm and how they treat children. I've noticed that since I've been coming I'm adopting that in my home life with my kids ... it's good to get other ideas [for bringing up kids]. (Sarah)

Even when my kids are here I can kind of just sit and have a cup of tea and talk to other mums ... if you are having a really bad week or something there's always someone here that you can talk to whether it be the teachers or a parent. (Karen)

One of the recent Coffee/Playgroups, attended by the researcher, involved a local Adult Literacy Trust person chatting with participants about the trust's ability to support people to obtain their driver's licence. Subsequently four mothers signed up for tuition and the trust organised to hold classes at the kindergarten in the *whānau* room so that childcare was not an issue. The classes were free and processes were put in place to assist candidates to budget for the cost of the licence fee over the weeks of their tuition. This is one of the many examples of an outside agency using the kindergarten because of convenience and the families' sense of 'feeling at home'. The opportunities afforded by the Coffee/Playgroup have helped families strengthen their interactions between their meso and exosystems.

Project Co-ordinator as mediator. The ability of the project co-ordinator to respond to issues as they arise and give immediate support has been an important aspect of the project. It appears that having the head teacher as the project co-ordinator has been very valuable. The head teacher has been the 'first port of call' for many families dealing with complex and complicated lives. It is evident that the strengths-based approach taken by the teachers and their genuine interest in children and their families provides a culture that enables families to 'open up' about topics of a personal nature. Often it is the head teacher who makes a phone call to another agency on behalf of a parent or in some instances accompanies families to meetings or appointments to ensure all parties can make the best decisions for a child and their family. The relationships that the head teacher has formed with personnel in the community and the understanding that other agencies have about the *Whānau Tangata* centre ensures dialogue occurs and relevant support is put in place. Other agencies will ring the kindergarten and talk with the teachers about the most suitable approach to support a family, which often results in meetings being held at the kindergarten. The kindergarten is regularly designated as the 'lead agency' because of the trust families have in the teachers and the physical space at

the kindergarten to accommodate a range of people, including young children. An analysis of the quarterly PS&D reports attest to the frequency and variety of support provided by the project co-ordinator. Strengthening Families, Group Special Education, Birthright, WINZ, dental nurse, Family Start, Public Health Services, local schools, Child, Youth & Family, food bank personnel, and midwives are some of the organisations that families have been supported to access through the *Whānau Tangata* centre. It is well recognised by many government and non-government agencies that the kindergarten teachers have an intimate knowledge of families in the community. This knowledge is a result of the trusting relationships that the teachers and *kaimahi* have built over time with the community and their refusal to adopt labels of ‘vulnerable’, ‘needy’ or ‘disadvantaged’. A pertinent comment made to researcher interviewers by a parent demonstrates the effects of the teachers’ attitudes.

This is classed as a low decile area ... 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 we shouldn’t have good resources, we shouldn’t have good teachers and things like that.
(Karen)

Realising aspirations at kindergarten. Through the kindergarten networks parents have found employment and education opportunities. The word-of-mouth information shared by parents as they meet and chat at the kindergarten has resulted in job opportunities for parents. In some instances the teachers have recognised parents’ abilities and strengths and supported them to seek out opportunities. The employment of the kindergarten administrator is one such example: the head teacher recognised her ICT skills and offered her the part-time position. This parent has since enrolled in a field-based early childhood qualification and is now in her final year of study. An initiative by the kindergarten association to provide the field-based component of the qualification in kindergartens has meant this parent has had strong support in a familiar and trusted environment. The Tongan *kaimahi* employed at the outset of the Parent Support and Development project is also in her final year of her early childhood qualification and continues to provide cultural and language support for Tongan families. She, too, is able to advise the teachers with planning and assessment from a Tongan perspective, allowing the culture to be visibly valued in the kindergarten. Recently, in response to pedagogical self-review processes, both the Samoan teacher and Tongan student have translated phrases and questions highlighting dispositional learning into their home languages to use in assessment documentation and conversations with children and families.

Another parent with a chef background has been employed part-time at the kindergarten to provide lunches for children who attend kindergarten for a ‘school day’ (8.45am–2.45pm). This change in hours of operation at the kindergarten occurred in 2009 in response to community requests.

A recent community initiative to increase participation in early childhood education saw two part-time positions advertised. After a rigorous application and selection process the successful candidates were two parents from the kindergarten. This success could be attributed to the attention given by teachers to ensuring families attending the kindergarten are empowered and supported in realising their aspirations.

Responsive initiatives. One of the priorities of the PS&D project at this kindergarten was to ensure any initiatives were in response to community requests. The teachers and management did not want to be seen as 'experts' who knew what was best for parents and families. Rather they were interested in working alongside the kindergarten community to help them realise their aspirations. Throughout the time of the project the issue of education and care for infants and toddlers arose. Overall the town had very little provision for the education and care of under two year olds and there was only one private fee-paying early childhood centre near the kindergarten. Although it was not within the budget of the PS&D funding, this issue was nevertheless seen as needing to be addressed. The kindergarten association sourced funding to extend the kindergarten building to incorporate a *pepe* (baby) centre for infants and toddlers. Coupled with a change in hours of operation to better suit the needs of the community, these two initiatives—the *pepe* centre and flexible hours—have strengthened parents' abilities to interact positively in their mesosystems. Parents have been able to increase their hours of employment, attend appointments and join in with school-related activities with their older children. Researcher observations documented a small group of young women with babies regularly staying at the kindergarten for the morning. These women interacted with their children, chatted to each other and with the teachers and *kaimahi* and joined in with music sessions.

The kindergarten is located next to a school. The teachers had been keen to work with the principal and new entrant teacher to ensure a smooth transition for children from the kindergarten. In conjunction with the university researchers a template was designed showing connections between the strands of *Te Whāriki* and the key competencies of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). A selection of Learning Stories from the transitioning child's portfolio were annotated on the template with both the template and stories included in a 'transition portfolio' for the child to take to school. This portfolio acted as a boundary-crossing artefact for the child and their family and the new entrant teacher. The portfolios are displayed in the new entrant classroom, providing the child with a strong sense of belonging, a familiar literacy tool and an opportunity for the teacher to make strong connections with the child and their learning. It also assists families to engage in their child's learning and develop an understanding of the continuity of learning between the two settings. The kindergarten and school have established a strong relationship with children of all ages readily moving between the two places and the head teacher and principal meeting regularly to share information and continuing to collaborate.

The Parent Support & Development project at this kindergarten has provided opportunities to strengthen the relationships between the different ecological systems of children and their families.

Conclusion

Early childhood centres offer a natural avenue for enhancing the ecological development of children and families. The holistic nature of the curriculum offers teachers many opportunities for making strong connections between the various ecological systems impacting on children and their families. In order to capitalise on these opportunities there must be policies such as the Parent Support and Development initiative to support the principles of the curriculum. As Bronfenbrenner (2005) states: "Children need the consistent and reliable care of their parents and other adults, but to

provide that care parents need the support of employers, schools and society as a whole” (p. 260). Therefore it is imperative that policies are developed and implemented that support everyday practices and take into account the ecological systems that encompass individuals.

A recent government taskforce charged with reviewing the provision of early childhood education in New Zealand has made recommendations about creating community hubs centred around early childhood centres, while a new government *Green Paper for Vulnerable Children* suggests that integrated services and using early childhood settings as points of entry to provide a range of services for children and families will enhance opportunities for vulnerable children. These two macrosystem initiatives offer possibilities for policy development to support an ecologically based curriculum and help individuals transform their lives.

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ⁱ Whānau is the Māori word for family, encompassing wide familial relationships.

