



***Collaborations:  
Teachers and a  
Family Whānau Support Worker  
in an  
Early Childhood Setting***

**CITIZENS PRESCHOOL  
AND NURSERY CENTRE OF INNOVATION  
2005-2007**

Final Report to the Ministry of Education

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# Table of Contents

	Page no.
<b>Citizens Preschool and Nursery Centre of Innovation Project: Executive Summary</b> .....	1
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	3
<b>Chapter One: Introduction To <i>Citizens Preschool And Nursery</i></b> .....	4
1.1 The centre.....	4
1.2 A new vision.....	5
1.3 Innovation in the centre.....	6
1.4 Beginning to find out more about supporting families.....	8
1.5 Becoming a centre of innovation.....	9
1.6 Conclusion.....	11
<b>Chapter Two: Messages From Literature And Theoretical Foundations</b> 12	
2.1 Introduction.....	12
2.2 Parent participation and support in early childhood education .....	13
2.2.1 Step One: Early intervention and effects on child participation.....	14
2.2.2 Step Two: Parent participation .....	14
2.2.3 Formal parent support programmes.....	15
2.2.4 Informal parent support and ECE.....	19
2.3 Communities of practice: ECE and social work .....	22
2.4 Theoretical foundations.....	23
<b>Chapter Three: Our COI Journey</b> .....	27
3.1 Introduction: Research as a journey .....	27
3.2 The travel itinerary: The research question.....	27
3.3 Packing the travel bags and confirming with travel companions: Signing the contracts and staff changes in an ECE context.....	29
3.3.1 A rearranged itinerary.....	32
3.4 Travel Underway: Action research as a tool for practitioners .....	33

3.5	Clearing customs and negotiating take off: Planning methods and gaining University of Otago ethical approval.....	35
3.6	Travel guides – published and personal: Research associates and lots of reading .....	36
3.6.1	Writing of the ethics application.....	37
3.6.2	Regular meetings .....	37
3.6.3	Provision of readings and theoretical positioning .....	37
3.6.4	Development of the research tools.....	38
3.6.5	Scaffolding dissemination and presentations – the travel slide show.....	38
3.6.6	Workshop days for analysis .....	38
3.6.7	Tensions in the research associate: Participation in the research team.....	39
3.7	Choosing the Sights: The enacted research.....	40
3.7.1	Roles and perceptions and beliefs .....	41
3.7.2	Transition into the <i>Nursery</i> .....	41
3.7.3	What counts as support? Support stories.....	42
3.7.4	Parent interviews and follow-up interviews.....	43
3.7.5	Recording teacher/parent connections.....	44
3.8	Choosing the transport: How the research journey was carried out .....	45
3.9	The key to travel: Taking the time to experience the trip.....	48
3.10	Destination ETA: Report writing and finalising thinking .....	50

**Chapter Four: Investigation One: The Family Whānau Support  
Worker, *Citizens Preschool And Nursery's*  
Innovation 52**

4.1	Introduction: The Family Whānau Support Worker position based at an early childhood centre.....	52
4.2	The Title: A reflection of philosophies .....	52
4.2.1	Title One: Advice and support worker .....	53
4.2.2	Title Two: Family Whānau Support Worker.....	54
4.3	Underway for the Family Whānau Support Worker.....	57
4.3.1	Introducing a Family Whānau Support Worker on an early childhood education site.....	57
4.3.2	Investigation: Clarity of purpose and role: Vision and practices .....	58

4.4	Results: Supporting parents and children – Family Whānau Support Worker .....	64
4.4.1	Being there and being seen .....	64
4.4.1.1	At enrolment and transition into the nursery 64times .....	64
4.4.1.2	At drop off and pick up times .....	64
4.4.2	Making time to talk .....	65
4.4.2.1	Catching up – A planned encounter .....	66
4.4.2.2	Whānau Room at <i>Citizens</i> .....	67
4.4.2.3	Family Whānau Support Worker led activities.....	69
4.4.3	Building bridges.....	69
4.4.3.1	Resources, community liaison and outreach.....	70
4.4.3.2	Teacher led initiations.....	71
4.4.3.3	Management team collaboration .....	72
4.5	Management perspectives on the successful employment of a Family Whānau Support Worker .....	75
4.6	Summary .....	77

**Chapter Five: Investigation Two: Parent Support And The Early Childhood Teachers .....**

	<b>Childhood Teachers .....</b>	<b>78</b>
5.1	Introduction: Existing support for parents at <i>Citizens Nursery</i> .....	78
5.2	Finding One: It's the little things that count .....	79
5.2.1	Knowing who is who in the environment .....	79
5.2.2	Knowing what a parent can expect from a teacher: Consistency in professional delivery.....	80
5.2.3	Transition time into the <i>Nursery</i> .....	83
5.2.4	Reassurance through the use of daily visual images.....	84
5.2.4.1	Written feedback .....	84
5.2.4.2	Visual images for parents .....	85
5.3	Finding Two: To know you better and for you to know me better .....	86
5.3.1	Family collages.....	86
5.3.2	Relationship chart – teachers and Family Whānau Support worker.....	87
5.3.3	Did our perceptions actually match what was happening? .....	88

5.3.4	Shared events with the families.....	90
5.3.4.1	Family celebrations.....	90
5.4	Finding Three: You don't know if you don't ask .....	93
5.4.1	Information book.....	93
5.4.2	The enrolment pack.....	94
5.4.3	Transition to preschool pack .....	95
5.5	Summary .....	96
<b>Chapter Six:</b>	<b>So What Does It All Mean? The <i>Centre Of Innovation</i></b>	
	<b>Journey Ends .....</b>	<b>99</b>
6.1	Introduction .....	99
6.2	Journey's end with a R.A.P - the early childhood way .....	99
6.3	<i>Citizens Nursery</i> as a community of practice .....	101
6.4	Final reflections on being a <i>Centre of Innovation</i> – from a teacher/researcher's perspective.....	104
	References .....	107
	Appendices.....	111
Appendix A:	Teachers and research associate agreement .....	112
Appendix B:	Readings provided for reflection for the research team.....	115
Appendix C:	Reflective questionnaire .....	117
Appendix D:	Reflective questions for transition stories .....	118
Appendix E:	The interview questions.....	119
Appendix F:	Example of questionnaire.....	121

## List of Tables

Table 1:	Family arrangements and full time or part-time status at <i>Citizens Nursery</i> .....	5
Table 2:	Initial Research Questions.....	28
Table 3:	Management Staff changes 2004-2007.....	30
Table 4:	Family Whānau Support Worker changes 2004-2007.....	30
Table 5:	Teaching Staff Changes 2004-2007.....	30
Table 6:	Research Associates 2004-2007.....	31
Table 7:	Selected parents' perceptions of the purpose for the Family Whānau Support Worker at <i>Citizens Preschool</i> and Nursery (2006).....	56
Table 8:	Selected responses from teachers on the role of the Family Whānau Support Worker.....	61
Table 9:	Agencies and Community Groups contacted by the Family Whānau Support Workers 2005-2007.....	70
Table 10:	Activities for a Family Whānau Support Worker (sample of tasks).....	71
Table 11:	Conclusions re a successful inclusion of a Family Whānau Support Worker in an early childhood centre.....	75
Table 12:	Questions for discussions with teachers.....	81
Table 13:	<i>Citizens</i> team consistency start and end of day.....	82
Table 14:	Selected responses from parents on information received from teachers (2007).....	83
Table 15:	Selected comments from parent interviews re. transition time.....	84
Table 16:	Baseline findings.....	89
Table 17:	Summary of findings – after intervention.....	89
Table 18:	Selected parents' comments on the transition to preschool information pack.....	95

## List of Figures

Figure 1:	Elliot (2005, p. 53): Model of Communication Accretion Spiral.....	21
Figure 2:	How early childhood centres support families and mediate links to other agencies.....	26
Figure 3:	The Research Framework.....	32
Figure 4:	Action Research: Accessed 2007: URL: <a href="http://www.sitesupport.org/.../ses3_act1_pag1.shtml">www.sitesupport.org/.../ses3_act1_pag1.shtml</a> .....	34
Figure 5:	The research methods: Investigations.....	41
Figure 6:	The interventions: Activities and happenings.....	46
Figure 7:	Whānau Room, <i>Citizens Preschool and Nursery</i> .....	68
Figure 8:	The Family Collage.....	86
Figure 9:	Photographs from the Family Celebration evening.....	92
Figure 10:	The R.A.P - <i>Citizens Nursery and Preschool</i> Community of Practice...	103

# Citizens Preschool and Nursery Centre of Innovation Project

## Executive Summary

This report describes the *Centre of Innovation (COI)* research project carried out by the teacher-researchers of *Citizens Preschool and Nursery*, Dunedin between 2005 to 2007. This *COI* was part of the second round of funded centres, where the focus area for research was how collaborative relationships impact on children's learning and development.

The innovation described in this report is the collaboration of early childhood teachers with a Family Whānau Support Worker within an early childhood centre to support families and whānau. Over the three years the teachers, with the support of the research associates from the *University of Otago*, undertook action research to investigate how best to support families who attended their centre.

*Citizens Preschool and Nursery* is a community based early childhood centre in South Dunedin. Since 2004 a step toward a 'one-stop-shop' model has been established within the early childhood community at *Citizens Preschool and Nursery* with the appointment of a Family Whānau Support Worker (a Social Worker role) sited within the early childhood complex. *Citizens Preschool and Nursery* has two centres (a *Preschool* and a *Nursery*) on the same site and is managed by Dunedin's *Methodist Mission*. Our focus for the *Centre of Innovation* research was designed to investigate the wider aspects of support for families and children that had been established at *Citizens Preschool and Nursery*, examining how the Family Whānau Support Worker and the teachers made a difference in the lives of the families attached to the *Nursery* centre. Our final research question has been: What counts as support for families from a childcare centre that actively works with parents and children?



Three key themes arose from our research data, reflections, and analysis of the role of the Family Whānau Support Worker for supporting families at *Citizens*. We have called these themes: *Being there and being seen*; *Making time to talk*; and *Building bridges*. Together these three themes demonstrate both the philosophies and the practices that provided successful practice examples for the work of a Family Whānau Support Worker in the early childhood setting. From our investigations with both the teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker the findings are grouped under three key themes: *It's the little things that count*, *To know you better and for you to know me better*, and *You don't know if you don't ask*.

Management policies and practices play a significant role in shaping what becomes possible within an early childhood centre. Over the three years we tracked the changes in philosophies and practices from management that worked to support both the teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker in their roles, and also worked to support parents directly.

The project revealed the importance of the early childhood R.A.P – relationships, attitudes and provisions. Just adding another staff member, albeit one in a social work role, is not by itself going to bring about increased support for families and enhanced learning environments for children. A key has been the combination of **relationships** and **attitudes** that the staff brought to their roles, and the **provisions** for parents and staff. These three features can work to either enhance family well-being and child outcomes or work as barrier to the same.

While this three-year journey for *Citizens* as a *Centre of Innovation* may have come to an end, the journey of supporting children and families and the constant reflection on and desire for quality teaching practices will continue at *Citizens Preschool and Nursery*.

## Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the children, parents and whānau of *Citizens Preschool and Nursery* for their part in this *Centre of Innovation* journey. The continued support from the management of *The Methodist Mission*, and the resources of the *University of Otago* has also made this journey possible.

Other travel companions that have joined us over the journey, in very important ways, have been Dr Anne Meade, Dr Sophie Alcock, Ms Patricia Nally and Ms Jane Ewens from the Ministry of Education. Their constant support and input has been invaluable for both the teacher-researchers and the research associates. We particularly wish to thank Dr Meade for her guidance and writing skill in the drafts of this final report.

As a final acknowledgement we wish to thank the other Round Two CO/s who shared their journeys, insights and fellowship with us over the three years.

# Chapter One

## Introduction To Citizens Preschool And Nursery

### 1.1 The centre

*Citizens Preschool and Nursery* is a community-based education and care centre in South Dunedin. It was one of the first childcare centres in New Zealand, established in 1930 by the City Council to enable women who worked in manual jobs to have access to quality childcare. The centre was originally in Stuart Street in central Dunedin.

In 1954, the centre became part of the Dunedin Methodist Mission's portfolio. In 1966, it moved to a new purpose-built facility on its current site in Hillside Road, South Dunedin. Much later, in 1988, after studying the care of children under two years of age, a *Nursery* was added using a converted house on an adjacent site.

The centres are open Monday to Friday from 7.30 am to 5.30 pm, and are licensed for a maximum of 36 children at the *Preschool*, and 15 under-2 year-olds in the *Nursery*. They open 50 weeks of the year, closing for two weeks over the Christmas break and statutory holidays. The centres run at above-minimum teacher ratios of one teacher to every 8 children in the *Preschool* and one teacher to 4 children in the *Nursery*. The *Preschool* has the equivalent of six full-time teachers and the *Nursery* has five. Both centres have children attending on a part or full-time basis depending on the requests of the families.

The centres have families that live both near them and out of the community. In 2007, of the *Nursery* families, nine lived within the immediate area (1 km radius approximately), three in the surrounding area (2.5 km radius), seven in more distant areas (7 km radius) and four families who were remote (beyond the 7 km radius). The profile in the *Preschool*, which has twice as many families, was very similar. The other feature of the group of families in the *Nursery* was that for 18 of the 23 families this was the first time they had a child attending *Citizens*.

The majority of families at the *Nursery* consist of two parents, both in employment or studying full or part-time and using the *Nursery* to cover the times when this is happening. (See Table 1)

**Table 1:**  
**Family arrangements and full time or part-time status at *Citizens Nursery***

<b>Family arrangement and attendance status</b>	<b>July 2006 (n=23)</b>	<b>July 2007 (n=22)</b>
Full-time, 2 parents both in employment/studying	14	6
Full-time, sole parent in employment/studying	0	3
Part-time, 2 parents both in employment /studying	5	8
Part-time, 2 parents one in employment/studying	0	2
Part-time, sole parent in employment/studying	2	1
Part-time, sole parent not in employment /studying	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>22</b>

## **1.2 A new vision**

The new millennium brought change at several levels for those involved in the Methodist Church and its services. A cascade of change which resulted in innovative developments at *Citizens Preschool and Nursery*.

In 1999, the Methodist Church, with *Te Taha Māori*, ran a conference at which a “Breaking the Cycle” philosophy was adopted. The church agreed to move from a theology of “Social Services” to a theology of “Social Responsibility”. The vision was to deal with the causes and effects of social disadvantage. The new strategic direction was away from a charity model to a strength based model. A decrease in “charitable” service delivery was proposed, with an increased emphasis on advocacy, public education, community development, networking and partnership with other agencies. Together more would be done to address structural injustices.

The *Methodist Mission* in South Dunedin was already focused on community development; so they decided to foster further community development.

Diane Darker joined *Citizens* in November 2000 as Supervisor, excited by the vision and the constructive solutions being developed by the wider Methodist Church. She was keen to build professional expertise in the early childhood team to contribute to the “Breaking the Cycle” strategy. The centre would focus more on strengthening families as a means of strengthening their community—an approach not seen in other agencies. How to turn this aim into reality needed further exploration.

### **1.3 Innovation in the centre**

Two conferences triggered the idea of a social worker integrated into the centre in the minds of *Citizens* leaders:

- the *Early Childhood Convention* 2003, and
- the *Methodist Mission Conference* in Wellington.

At the *Early Childhood Convention*, Margy Whalley spoke of the innovative integrated approach they had undertaken at the *Pen Green* centre in Corby, Northamptonshire. *Pen Green* is like a “one-stop shop for young children and their families”. It had been established in a run down steel-mill town with high rates of unemployment and poverty. Its services included early education and day care, parent education, family support services and community health. Her speech included powerful messages about the impact of poverty on children. Many of the children attending *Citizens Preschool and Nursery* live in families who are experiencing poverty with insufficient food and warm clothing. Many have health issues beyond the norm. Family violence springs from these conditions. *Citizens’* staff know the correlation of poverty and complex educational needs, as do staff at *Pen Green* half a world away.

Margy Whalley's philosophy encompassed the idea of centres as learning organisations, with leaders who were effective in inspiring and maintaining a culture of continuous learning and self-evaluation.

*Citizens Preschool and Nursery* leaders saw the potential of learning organisations for building communities and had a vision of developing something similar to *Pen Green* in South Dunedin, a community that also has high levels of poverty. A basic belief of the leaders was that the children and their parents had the right to access high quality early education services.

After the conferences, those who had attended came back to talk through possibilities for South Dunedin with their colleagues. They identified key service elements:

- Teachers who are committed to improving standards in teaching
- Support systems for families
- Self-review or action research processes to help staff to reflect on ways to improve the above in order to facilitate better outcomes for children.

A 'social worker on site' was proposed in late 2003, but not with the title 'social worker'. Past experience indicated the need for caution as confusion and alarm among parents could ensue. After discussion, it was decided that *Advice and Support Worker* was more user friendly. The teachers were familiar with Bronfenbrenner's theory about ecology of human development, as underpins *Te Whāriki, the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996). It helped frame the discussion between centre leaders and Methodist Mission management. The questions they canvassed together included:

- Would parents and caregivers accept this new person in the centre?
- How would s/he work within an educational team?
- Was advice and support role going to work for us?
- What is the influence of societal landscape on the child's development?

- Using Bronfenbrenner's model (1979), how would a change in the child's centre affect the child and its immediate family micro-system? How might it ripple through other layers in the 'ecology'?

Bronfenbrenner (1979) reminds us that relationships at the micro-system level have an impact in two directions both away from the child and toward the child. For example, the child affects the beliefs of the parents, and a child's parents also affect his/her beliefs and behaviour. The same happens in early childhood education settings.

The meso-system provides connection between the structures of the child's micro-systems. Our primary concern was focused on this part of the ecological model, i.e., the connection between the child's teachers and his/her family within the community. What would happen with the addition of an *Advice and Support Worker* to the staff in the early childhood centre? The thinking was that an *Advice and Support Worker* could help the teachers to support the parents as primary caregivers and she would help enhance the environment to make it more welcoming and nurturing for the families. This additional support would provide a chance to "break the cycle" for many of children attending *Citizens*. Investment in such a person would show that the work done to further the interests of children was valued.

The management and board approved having a social worker on site. The proposal was seen as similar to work undertaken at The Christchurch Methodist Mission's centre *Aratupu*, which had worked well for six years for children and their families. Visits were made to *Aratupu* during 2004 to learn from their experiences, although acknowledging that our initiative needed to fit the South Dunedin context. We noted positive features such as the supervisor and social worker's office being adjacent, which enabled effective communication and service delivery. The different staff worked very closely, especially at enrolment time. There were good links between several services. We also noted likely differences, such as our facilities layout being more fragmented. The main difference was that our thinking was based on an educational theoretical framework, whereas *Aratupu* used a social work model.

## 1.4 Beginning to find out more about supporting families

In early 2004 the Ministry of Education invited community representatives to form a cluster to look at how the community was meeting the needs of the children in South Dunedin. Children were missing out on early childhood education and also primary health care. Could a collaborative approach—as per *Pathways to the Future* (2002)—change this? After several meetings, *Citizens Preschool and Nursery* submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Education for a short term research contract focused on supporting families. The research in South Dunedin entailed:

- A questionnaire survey distributed to parents;
- Some face to face interviews with parents;
- A needs analysis form answered by 10 social service agencies and each of the early childhood centres in the suburb.

The analysis revealed several main themes:

- Health issues – how to access health, dental and Plunket services and where to go for information;
- Parenting skills – basic care skills;
- Lack of transport;
- Family budgeting issues;
- The need for one-on-one support for families.

Many of the secondary issues related to access to information. These were addressed promptly through the production of a booklet listing advice and support organisations, funded by the Ministry of Education. A large cluster meeting was convened to share information about resources and networks for teachers and parents. The booklet was launched on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2004. The project team recommended a person be appointed who could meet and discuss needs and refer families to appropriate agencies when required. A pilot was run for three months. At the conclusion of that contract there was a strong recommendation to continue the *Advice and Support Worker's* role.



The Dunedin Methodist Mission did continue the Advice and Support role, thus demonstrating its commitment to community development. The position was called the Whānau Support Worker, reflecting the values and commitment to Te Ao Māori at *Citizens Preschool and Nursery*. Jo Dagger was the first Family Whānau Support Worker; followed by Maureen McKay and when she left Tricia McLean was appointed, and is the current Family Whānau Support Worker. Looking back through a summary of their activities, these women divided their attention between support functions within the early childhood centre (for example, assisting child and parents in making transitions) and arranging group activities such as coffee mornings to build community networks for the families.

### **1.5 Becoming a *centre of innovation***

It seemed only natural to follow the first research contract with an application to do further research. It was felt that *Centre of Innovation (COI)* work would be another exciting challenge. As the focus area for research in Round Two COIs was how collaborative relationships impact on children's learning and development, we decided to apply. Our teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker were on a collaborative journey. Our vision was social inclusion. We wanted to seek answers to the same questions that the Ministry of Education was posing. An expression of interest was lodged.

Centres of Innovation are to:

- Build innovative approaches that result in improved early childhood learning and teaching;
- Facilitate action research, with the help of experienced researchers, to show the effects of innovation on learning and teaching; and
- Share the knowledge, understanding and models of practice with others in the early childhood education sector and parents and whānau.

*Citizens Nursery and Preschool* was successful in being selected as a COI. Judith Duncan and Michael Gaffney from the *Children's Issues Centre* at the *University of Otago* agreed to be the research associates and mentors.

However, just after the contract for our *COI* project was signed with the Ministry of Education our manager left in December 2004. In 2005, the Head Teacher in the *Nursery* left to live in Australia and the Head Teacher in the *Preschool* accepted a position with the Otago University College of Education. Kylie Preedy was promoted to Head Teacher in the *Nursery* and became the “back-bone” of the *COI* teacher-researcher team. Other staff in the *Nursery* who participated in the *COI* research were Tinaka Kilgour, Jacqui King, Bobbie Parata, Kirsty Thomson, and Linda Thompson. Diane Darker drew the *COI* project together when she returned to *Citizens* in 2007.

As a *COI*, we headed out initially without a “driver” or “navigator”. There was loss of direction and motivation within the teaching team. This had an impact on the research too in the beginning. However, once Bobbie Parata came as Supervisor, the team was rebuilt and re-energised, and members expressed their commitment to the *COI* research. In June 2005, the *COI* work began in earnest with a re-defined focus. The research question was:

***What difference does support make to children’s learning and development in an early childhood education centre?***

## **1.6 Conclusion**

Support services for families were integrated into *Citizens Nursery* to support and strengthen families and strengthen the South Dunedin community. These services included: Family Literacy, Caversham After School Care, OSCAR and Holiday Programmes, Community Computing, and Support and Advocacy.

Many changes to services were made or further developed during *Citizens* tenure as a *COI*. They are summarised here in order to set the scene for later chapters. The changes included:

- Increased support for families and whānau by both a Family Whānau Support Worker and the teachers;
- Enriched play, and improved learning and development experiences for the children;

- Provision of primary and community healthcare at the centre in the form of advice about family health and child development.

# Chapter Two

## Messages From Literature And Theoretical Foundations

### 2.1 Introduction

Family support services are intended for families who are coping with the normal stresses of parenting, to provide reassurance, strengthen a family facing child-rearing problems, or prevent the occurrence of child maltreatment. (McCrosey & Meezan, 1998 cited in Statham, 2000, p.1)

This chapter discusses research and investigations in the early childhood years, based within or around early childhood education provisions that are designed to also support families. While supporting families as an early childhood education (ECE) goal is a relatively new concept in New Zealand, internationally early childhood centres have often been a part of wider community based provisions, variously referred to as joined-up services, service-hubs, one-stop shop, or wrap-around services. In New Zealand the *Ministry of Education*, with the *Ministry of Social Development*, have been funding a pilot programme entitled *ECE Centre Based Parent Support and Development Project* which is an initiative to:

develop the role of ECE centres as a community hub, or venue, for the provision of parent support. It is a pilot project aimed at helping government to better understand what works in parent support programmes in NZ. The project is aimed at families at risk of poor health, education and social outcomes and who have children aged birth-3. (Ministry of Education, 2006)

This initiative has been funded since 2006 and currently 18 centres are trialing different methods and approaches to support families. These new initiatives systematically include early childhood centres as part of wider family and community support. They follow international moves towards such teaching practices (Whalley, 2006), and recommendations in New Zealand research for increases in such practices (Duncan, Bowden, & Smith, 2005). *Citizens'* innovation of a social worker based in their early childhood centres acknowledges that early childhood centres are places within the community that parents feel comfortable and safe to access a range of resources and support. While this model is a new one for ECE, the Social Worker in Schools (SWiS) has been a successful part of the New Zealand primary and

intermediate school sector for some time. As of 2007 more than 300 schools have a social worker in their school. The focus of the social worker is to work with the 'whole family' at the school, and to network within the school and with community agencies (Bennett, 2007).

Working with families within the early childhood sector has been a key part of both the *Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum. He Whāriki Matauranga mo nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 1996), and *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki. A 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education* (Ministry of Education, 2002). Both these documents, which have shaped the ECE sector, emphasise the importance of promoting collaborative relationships (with parents and community agencies), and of establishing well-being, belonging and community within each early childhood centre for families. It is within these contexts that early childhood practitioners are examining how they can better support families, as well as the children, in their centres.

The following sections of this chapter identify the key ideas in the literature being promoted that influenced our thinking about family support for the COI research.

## **2.2 Parent participation and support in early childhood education**

Parent/family support has been described and analysed from different frames of reference over the last twenty-plus years. Beginning with a focus on early intervention, policies were often directed at individuals and ignored the wider societal influences, for example, poverty. More recently however, policies and practices to support families focus on supportive communities and building networks for families, alongside the more individualised support as necessary. However, issues of poverty are often still individualised in New Zealand policies and practices.

While families continue to struggle with inadequate income, housing, poor health and violent communities (Egeland, Carlson & Sroufe, 1993; Hawley & De Haan, 1996; Smith, 1996b) there is a need to improve the communities and social environments in which families and early childhood centres are situated. (Duncan, Bowden, & Smith, 2006, p. 89)

Research has demonstrated that ECE can assist in the growth and development of children, and in the well-being of families, but that it cannot be the

cure-all for wider societal dis-ease (Smith, 1996). In a recent report New Zealand has compared poorly with other OECD countries for indicators of child well-being (Bradshaw, Hoelscher, & Richardson, 2007), demonstrating that New Zealand has considerable societal 'dis-ease'.

### **2.2.1 Step One: Early intervention and effects on child participation**

Parent support has been predominantly explored from early interventionist perspectives. The focus in the late 1980s was a call for interventions into family life to improve outcomes for children. Early intervention programmes have focused on the development of the preschool child and do not necessarily discuss the family. These interventions involve children attending early education centres, for example, the *Perry Preschool Project* (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993) and *Head Start* (Zigler & Meuncho, 1992) programmes. The intent was that intensive ECE, assisted by home visiting programmes and parent participation in the centre, would provide an optimal start for children and break the 'cycle of poverty'. However, these programmes could not address systemic poverty surrounding the children although they made gains later in school (Zigler & Meuncho, 1992).

Researchers debate whether ECE can produce long-term gains in the face of larger systemic pressures. They have shown that ECE can produce short-term gains on disadvantaged children's performance (Smith, Grima, Gaffney, Powell, Masse, & Barnett, 2000, p. 28) and high-quality programmes can produce long-term improvements in children's school success (Smith, et al., 2000, p. 33). The current international trend is to provide a more comprehensive approach that focuses on children and their families (OECD 2001; Powell 1997). A "family systems" perspective (St. Pierre & Layzer, 1998).

### **2.2.2 Step Two: Parent participation**

Researchers have not closely examined the impact of ECE for families. Research has examined ECE as support for: maternal employment (Callister & Podmore, 1995; Hofferth, 1999; McPherson, 2006); whether maternal employment impacts on child development and outcomes (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2004); how to reduce maternal dependency on government benefits (Swadener, 2000); and cutting costs of childcare for families (Callister, Podmore, Galtry & Sawicka, 1995). A comprehensive

literature review examining the effects of participation in ECE (Smith, et al., 2000) concluded that outcomes for families were the following:

- Children's participation in various forms of education and care can influence family psychological well-being, family relationships, and family functioning. The availability of childcare can encourage women to go to work, but it can also have some negative effects for the well-being of family members, such as increased role strain amongst mothers who must juggle work and childcare responsibilities.
- Economic policies and childcare support programs have to be appropriate for families and children, and they should be flexible for the diverse needs of working and non-working parents who live in a variety of family formations.
- Economic disadvantage may result for families of low socio-economic status when subsidies set up for economic and childcare assistance are very strict and limited in their rules for eligibility.
- Parental satisfaction with early childhood programs is not always an indicator of quality, and there is a question amongst researchers as to whether parents can readily identify indicators of quality in early childhood care and education.
- The literature indicates that there are now very clear and well-recognized indicators of quality for successful outcomes in approaches to early childhood programs that utilize a parent education component, and that parent education works best when there is a partnership between early childhood program providers and families. (Smith, et al., 2000, p. 5)

Duncan, Bowden and Smith (2005) examined whether early childhood centres supported family resilience, in addition to the direct education and care outcomes for children. Three centres were chosen across New Zealand, who were in areas of high-risk families, and were known for supporting and working with their families, as well as the children. Based on observations and interviews this study concluded that early childhood education centres were often the 'heart of a community' and parents found them a 'neutral' and safe place to seek help and support – both from the teachers and from other parents in the community. Parents met others in the community and were able to build up friendships and networks – some of which continued as the children attended school. The researchers concluded that early childhood education centres have the potential to provide the form and style of support that parents preferred. Its non-targeted approach removed barriers of discrimination. The authors cautioned against childhood teachers adding to high levels of parent support to their existing workload.

### 2.2.3 Formal parent support programmes

Just as ECE services cannot address systemic poverty, parenting programmes cannot address it either.

Parenting programmes in isolation cannot address well-established patterns of inappropriate parenting – these programmes should form part of a broader social development strategy. In the first instance, families accommodation and income needs must be met. If parents face chronic stress and struggle to meet basic needs, it is a challenge for them to focus on supporting their children’s learning and development. (Kerslake Hendricks & Balakrishnan, 2005, p. 5)

An increased focus on parenting has led to a range of formal programmes being offered, with the aim to increase parenting skills and knowledge and to reduce parenting isolation. The early years can often be very stressful for parents – particularly for inexperienced parents (Lee & Thompson, 2000). Formal parent support programmes range from parenting education workshops, parent skills programmes to home visiting interventions. Parent education “has long been viewed in the field of early childhood interventions as integral to the success of such programmes for long-term family and child outcomes” (Powell, 1996, cited in Smith, et al., 2000, p. 87). Kagitcibasi (1997), in a review of parent education programmes in Turkey, highlights that indicators for good parent education are:

- A program of parent education that provides a contextual approach with multiple goals and multiple targets;
- Shared goals between providers and parents;
- Proper timing of the introduction of the parent education component;
- Empowerment of parents within the program;
- Cost-effectiveness that can benefit parents and children over an extended period of time. (Kagitcibasi, 1997, pp. 267-268)

Weissbourd and Kagan (1989, pp. 21-23) also set out four similar main principles for family support initiatives:

- Focus on prevention and recognise the importance of the early years;
- Employ an ecological approach to delivery;



- Take a developmental view of parents (with the aim of families developing their own support networks);
- Understand the universal value of support (build up parents' strengths to participate more in their own neighbourhood and community activities).

Similarly, Powell (1996), in his overview of parent education, recommends that programmes should have shared perspectives with the parents, and that there should be continuity and congruity between the setting and family at all times. Lee and Thompson (2000, p. 17) conclude that in the U.S.: "Research shows that families are more likely to use services that are convenient, supportive, accessible, affordable, flexible and nonthreatening".

More recently parent education has become incorporated into the one-stop services with other family services and early childhood education. Munford, Sanders, Maden & Maden (2007, p. 73) argue that early childhood education combined with parent support programmes offer the potential to address "some of the more intractable challenges presented by struggling and vulnerable families".

In a recent OECD report reviewing ECE provisions in 12 countries, the reviewers identified key programmes that linked ECE centres, parents and communities. The authors argue that supportive mechanisms associated with ECE programmes can strengthen and build the social cohesion between families, communities and government and non-governmental sectors. Multi-agency initiatives that incorporate ECE provision more adequately meet the needs of today's parents. Also, when located in areas of high need, they promote equal educational opportunities without stigmatising individual children (OECD 2001, p. 84).

In England, the *Children's Centres* (formerly called *Early Excellence Centres*) are being established to "improve the life chances of children in the most disadvantaged areas of UK, and to improve parents' access to work and training" (Whalley, 2006, p. 8). Key features include the integration of services, collaborative planning between care services and education, and family support (Warin, 2007). Whalley (2006, p. 8) argues that the *Children's Centres* are more than a reflection of government policies:

It seems to me that they are the hope of progressive politics, combining as they do parents and children's individual choices and aspirations, and families' sense of collective identity and belonging within their communities.

In each *Children's Centre* a variety of services are housed in the one location where the families themselves are located. They are open to everyone in a non-targeted approach to families. Most commonly these centres house:

- Early years education;
- Year-round extended hours provision to support children and families;
- Inclusive flexible education and care for children in need and children with special educational needs;
- Adult community education;
- Family support services, and
- A focus for voluntary work and community regeneration. (Whalley, 2006, p. 9)

Wigfall (2002) describes the "one-stop-shop" approach taken by the *Coram Community Campus* in inner London. The range of services for young children and their families, includes care, education, health, parent support and other services (for example, a child psychologist and social worker), on one site. It overcomes the problem of compartmentalisation and fragmentation in traditional children's services, and is based on research showing the importance of early preventive work with parents in supporting resilience.

*Sure Start* is another UK strategy which was designed to provide a cross-departmental, 'joined-up' service to "work with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of preschool children – particularly those who are disadvantaged – to ensure that they are ready to thrive when they get to school" (Anning, 2004, p. 2).

Some New Zealand examples of approaches to parent education and support include:

- The Whānau Toko I Te Ora, delivered by Te Ropu Wahine Māori Toki I Te Ora, is a national parenting programme for Maori Whānau delivered through home visiting, a whānau learning programme and group support (Livingstone, 2002);
- Parents as First Teachers: “ (PAFT) is a programme that enables families with young children to access free, practical support and guidance. This support lasts from before birth to 3 years” (Ministry of Education, 2008). Parent educators make regular visits to the parent in her/his home to “share information, share practical ideas, give guidance as the child (or children) grow and develop” (Ministry of Education, 2008);
- Te Aroha Noa – “a non-governmental whānau/family and community centre that has developed its own particular blend of early childhood education and parent support and development over the past 17 years” (Munford et al., 2007, 73).

What differs from these examples, and both the *Citizens* innovation and the 18 current ECE centre based parent support and development projects around New Zealand, is that they are led by early childhood centres themselves with parent support as integral to their educational practices. Early education is not an add-on to an established parent/whānau support community programme.

#### **2.2.4 Informal parent support and ECE**

Ongoing support for parents through early childhood programmes has been identified as sharing aspects of good teaching practices in early childhood education. This style of support has been termed ‘informal’ as it occurs within, and as a by-product, of high quality early childhood education rather than ‘formal parent support’.

Hamilton, Roach and Riley (2003) describe approaches to parent support within early childhood centres as encompassing a socio-cultural approach to teaching that sees the child as embedded in their home and community lives – of which the early childhood centre is only one part. They go on to argue that conceptualising teaching and learning in this way:

[I]s more accurate and therefore more useful for children, families, and the early care and education profession. We have learned that we can have a deeper and more meaningful impact on child development by partnering with

the child's family. We can learn from the family how to adapt our program to their values, goals, and culture. Families can learn from us how to continue developmentally appropriate practices at home. And for many families, we can become an advocate that connects them to other beneficial programs in the community. (Hamilton, et al., 2003, p. 232).

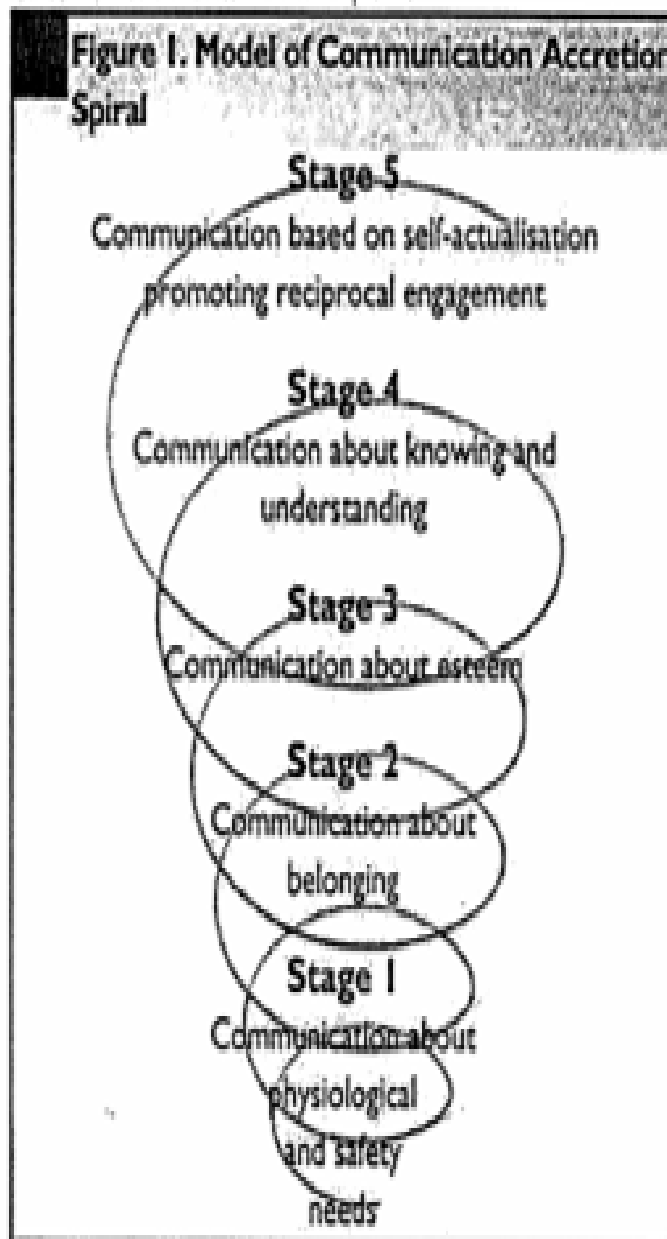
Duncan et al. (2006), reporting on their earlier study of early childhood centres and family resilience, concluded that the key to effective support for families in the centres was a mix of regular informal support, with occasional formal support (parent workshops and meetings with agencies). Building and maintaining sustainable relationships between families and staff, families and families, and families and outside agencies were the mechanisms that parents identified as important for family and child well-being. Early childhood centres can see, and position, themselves as a central focus within communities.

Duncan (2006, p. 14) describes relationships with parents as having “evolved from ‘working with parents’, to ‘partnership with parents’, to the current call for ‘collaboration with parents’”. She argues that this shift in discourse has accompanied a shift in expected outcomes for families participating in ECE.

Many suggestions are available for teachers who wish to improve ‘working with parents’. Dalli (1997) calls for early childhood teachers to attend to the ‘Relationships’ principle of *Te Whāriki* by being responsive to parents and builds strong connections between home and centre. Hughes and MacNaughton (2002) challenge teachers to re-evaluate their assumptions about parents’ knowledge. They propose giving equal weight with teacher views to parents’ views about what should happen in the ECE centre. They conclude that ways to increase participation and involvement in ECE for parents is to address the centres’ own politics and ways of operating. Teachers can:

- Give parents a real voice without feeling that this directly threatens staff’s professional identity and expertise;
- Negotiate with parents shared meanings and understandings about who their child is and how s/he should be treated;
- Allocate sufficient time to negotiate with parents face-to-face and in ways that rest on and continually re-create shared understandings of the child. (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2002, p.18)

Elliott (2005), presents a model she calls 'The Communication Accretion Spiral' (see Figure 1). The interactions between parents/families and teachers can change over the five stages of communication represented in a spiral. This model distinguishes between communication that consists of sharing basic child safety information compared to the more personal information. In the beginning, conversations are focused on communication exchanges about children's physiological and safety needs. As parents and staff develop a shared relationship around the child, the exchange of information begins to move beyond the child's physiological needs and state of wellbeing into communications about the child's individuality and the family as a whole (Elliot, 2005, p. 52). Later stages involve increasing parent engagement and contributions. A central feature of this model is the opportunity for parents and teachers to talk about topics that are important to each other.



**Figure 1: Elliot (2005, p. 53): Model of Communication Accretion Spiral**

Collaboration with parents and provision of family support must be balanced with teachers' work with children, whilst maintaining an acceptable workload (Duncan, et al., 2005). MacNaughton (2004), recalling her examination of collaborative relationships in early education in Australia, highlights that:

there must be increased staff time for work with parents, a re-design of physical spaces to enable this work to grow and active professional support for working with an unpredictable collision of interests that flourish in conditions of cultural, social and linguistic diversity. (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 7)

*Citizens Preschool and Nursery's* introduction of a social worker was a way to both increase the teachers' abilities to relate to the parents, and to balance the extra work and responsibility entailed in giving additional support to families.

### **2.3 Communities of practice: ECE and social work**

Changing the focus from only looking at children in isolation to encompassing the family, and the families' communities is of equal importance for child outcomes and family well-being (Brown, Amwake, Speth & Scott-Little, 2002; Powell, 1996; St. Pierre, & Layzer, 1998).

Providing multi-agency, joined-up services, or integrated services can remove duplication. However, 'one-stop shop' approaches where families can access one service for all their requirements: "a kind of supermarket for health, educational, legal, financial, therapeutic, emotional, social and recreational needs" (Warin, 2007, p. 90) brings together the different communities of practice. Their differences can mean that the approach does not work as well as expected.

The implications of working across 'communities of practice' have to be acknowledged when establishing collaborative relationships. At *Citizens Preschool and Nursery*, the introduction of a social worker into an educational setting, involved the joining of two different communities of practice in the one location, for the same set of families (our COI findings are shared in Chapters Four and Five). Communities of practice are described as practices "where knowledge is used in action and developed into forms that are acceptable within each community" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, cited in Edwards, 2000, p. 187). Edwards (2000) describes communities of practice as a group sharing common histories, values and meanings to objects, events and actions. She argues "one becomes a member of a community of practice through increasing engagement with the knowledge in use in that community" (Edwards, 2000, p. 187). Anning (2004) explains how knowledge is gained through action, in the activities of the practitioners, and "brings with it the dangers and habits of rituals of practice being passed from generation to generation of workers with few opportunities for making that knowledge explicit or for questioning the validity of that knowledge for transformation into new ways of working" (Anning, 2004, p. 2). Developing new ways of working and new versions of

professional knowledge (Anning, 2004; Edwards, 2000) is the challenge for those who do work in collaborative endeavours. Anning (2004) also discovered in an evaluation of two UK *Centres of Excellence* that, as well as competing community of practices within the Centres, there were differences in the status that were accorded to the professionals – early childhood teachers receiving the lowest status. Those within the early childhood staff with greater qualifications perceived themselves with higher status.

These challenges have also been identified in other research. Cigno and Gore (1999) found that differences “in training, focus, status and allegiance to different validating and professional bodies” (cited in Warin, 2007, p. 90) can undermine processes of professionals working together. Different ways of conceptualising practice can also provide barriers (Easen, Atkins, & Dyson, 2000) and work against shared goals and outcomes. There is often “a lack of common purpose between professionals from different services” (Warin, 2007, p. 90). Atkinson, Doherty and Kinder (2005, pp. 12-16) identify the challenges of multi-agency working as: sharing funding and resources (fiscal and nonfiscal); understanding the roles and responsibilities including the need to move beyond existing roles; competing priorities between agencies; poor communication between agencies; ‘agency culture’ as affecting practices; and lack of training opportunities to conceptualise new ways of working. Duncan (2006) discusses similar concerns expressed in the agency and teacher interviews in the family resilience study when exploring the importance of linking parents with agencies. Teachers and the representatives from the agencies wanted good communication and trusted relationships between contacts so that no harm would come to a family by being ‘passed onto’ another agency.

## **2.4 Theoretical foundations**

We have drawn on the ecological theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner to both establish and examine our innovation. Ecological theory has provided us with the lens with which to examine our innovation (the position of a social worker within an early childhood centre), and the early childhood centre’s support for families and the wider community as equally important parts of the support networks for families.



Ecological theory was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) to conceptualise child development being influenced by a variety of interrelated social contexts. These contexts have been described as nested Russian dolls (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ministry of Education, 1996), as a series of nested spheres (Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2005) and key circles of influence that surround a child (Phelan, 2004 cited in Brendtro, 2006). At the centre is the child. The next ecological sphere, or circle, directs attention to the most immediate contexts of the child's life – their home and early childhood centre settings. This sphere may also include other settings that the child spends considerable time, for example, other child-care settings, and shared home settings. These are seen as the most powerful influences as they are the places that the child spends most time and where the significant people in the child's life are. The next spheres, or circles, exert indirect influences on the child include broader cultural, economic, social and political forces. Ecological theory also examines the interrelationships between these spheres, or circles.

Bronfenbrenner referred to the immediate environments of family, school, peers, and neighbourhood as a child's microsystem. The interconnection of these environments is the mesosystem. Surrounding these spheres were increasingly broader circles of community influence called the exosystem, and finally, the cultural and societal forces of the macrosystem. (Brendtro, 2006, p. 166)

Bronfenbrenner (1979) has suggested that the links between environments should be enhanced so that they can function as a network that supports positive development.

Studies, which have drawn on ecological theory, have identified how the interrelationships between the contexts can either work to enhance a child's development or to create conflict and tension for a child (Brendtro, 2006; Duncan, Bowden, & Smith, 2005; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2005). Brendtro (2006, p. 165), recommends that research should look closely at the child's immediate circles of influence (family, peers, school) and ask:

1. What are the transactions of the child with the family, peers and school?
2. Does this circle of influence create stress or offer support for the child?

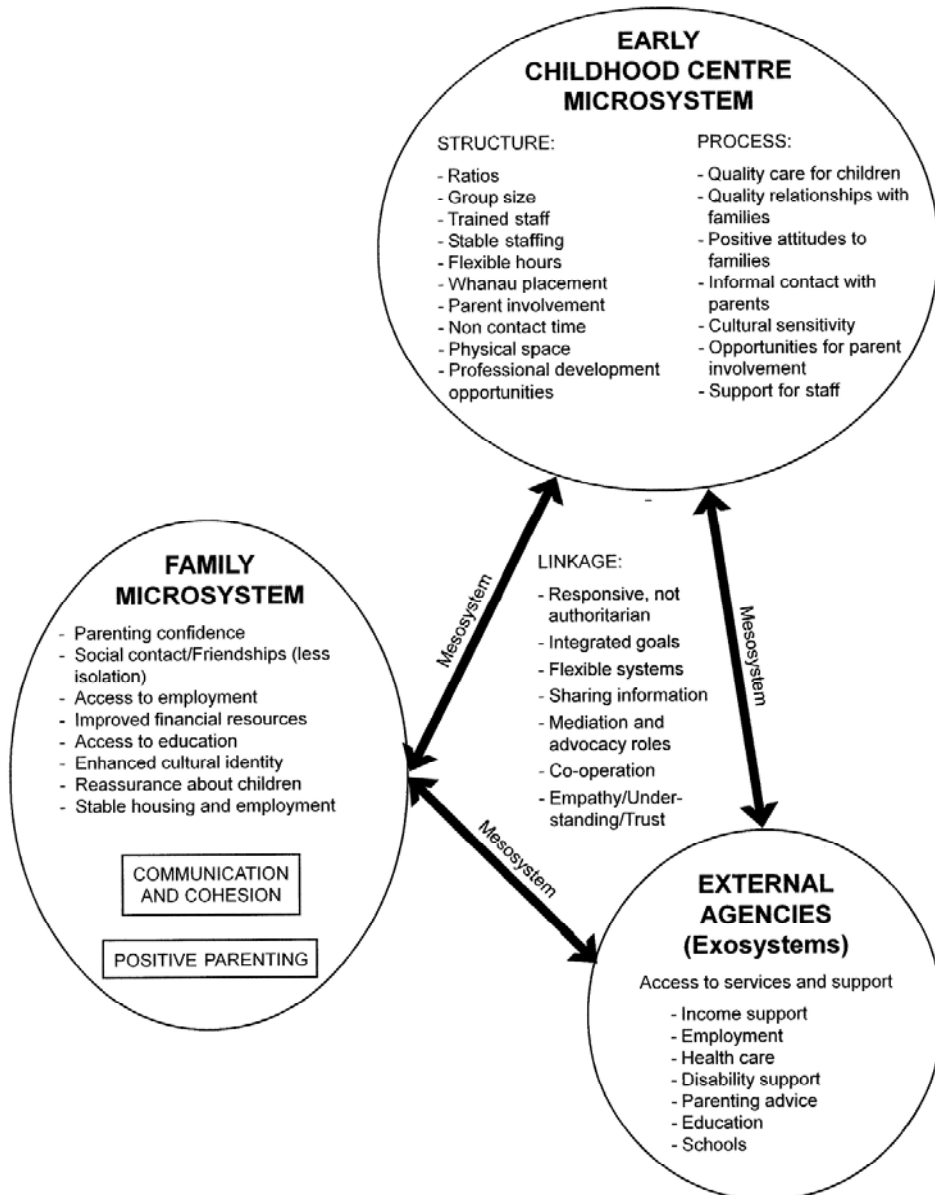
He goes onto argue that when the ecology is in balance, children live in harmony with self and others. But if the ecology is disrupted or in tension, the child experiences conflict and maladjustment” (Brendtro, 2006, p. 165).

Smith et al. (2000, p. 88) concluded their ecological review of parental participation in early childhood education with the following recommendation:

According to the ecological model presented at the beginning of this review, the effective outcomes for families participating in early childhood services are evident (based on the literature examined) when the needs of families are addressed by early childhood programs within each of the components of the ecological model. In this regard, the literature stresses that early childhood services must encompass a broad range of economic and social issues, both inside and outside the family, in order to serve effectively families’ economic and social needs. This will also optimize early childhood education’s influence on the development of children within the family and the wider community.

The *Citizens’ COI* research team used ecological theory and positioned the focus of our investigations on both immediate settings for the child – their home and *Citizens*. We were interested in how the interrelationships between the family and the centre could be strengthened to improve learning outcomes for the children and enhance the support for and well-being of the families. Drawing on Duncan, Bowden and Smith’s (2005) ecological model of how early childhood centres support families and mediate links with social agencies (see Figure 2) we situated the Family Whānau Support Worker into our own model (see Chapter 6). We explored the interrelationships at the meso-level of the Family Whānau Support Worker within the early education setting. See the following chapter for our methods of investigation.

Taken from: Duncan, Bowden, and Smith (2005, p. 92):



**Figure 2: How early childhood centres support families and mediate links to other agencies**

# Chapter Three

## Our COI Journey

### 3.1 Introduction: Research as a journey

The research endeavours of the *Centres of Innovations* have been described in many different ways. In the early phases of these three-year projects, a metaphor of ‘research journey’ has been used to describe the beginnings of the projects, from the ‘getting started’ and ‘getting underway’ to the first discoveries within the research itself, to the flow-on into professional practices and relationships

The metaphor of a journey is a particularly apt one for this *Centre of Innovation (Citizens Nursery)*, as with any journey, there is the anticipated travel and planned destination, followed by the unexpected last minute changes to the itinerary (and possibly travel companions), some complications just after embarking on the trip, the lost luggage along the way, the serendipitous surprises and treats that were totally unexpected when you least expected them on the trip, and an arrival that could never have been predicted when planning first began. For the staff and research associates from the *Citizens Nursery Centre of Innovation* our research journey encountered all of these aspects of a journey, which enabled us to reflect as we traversed the hills, mountains and gullies of action research in a *Nursery* context. This chapter discusses both the intended journey for this project, and the journey as experienced by the teachers and research associates.

### 3.2 The travel itinerary: The research question

**What difference does support for families make to children’s learning and development in early childhood centres?**

The research question in the proposal for the *Citizens Centre of Innovation (COI)* was designed to investigate the wider aspects of support for families and children that had been established at *Citizens Preschool and Nursery* (see Chapter One). In particular the aspects of support, and who fulfilled these roles of support, were broken down over the three years to be examined in the following ways:

**Table 2:  
Initial Research Questions**

**Year One:**

- What difference does support for families make to infants' and toddlers' learning and development in the *Nursery Centre*?
- How do families respond to the role of the Whānau Support Worker in the *Nursery Centre*?
- What impact does the role of the Whānau Support Worker have on infants' and toddlers' learning and development in the *Nursery Centre*?

**Year Two:**

- What difference does supporting families make to children's learning and development in the transition from the *Nursery* to the *Preschool Centre*?
- How do families respond to the role of the Whānau Support Worker in the transition from the *Nursery* to the *Preschool Centre*?
- What impact does the role of the Whānau Support Worker have on children's learning and development in the transition from the *Nursery* to the *Preschool Centre*?

**Year Three:**

- What difference has supporting families made to children's learning in both the *Nursery* and *Preschool* centres?
- How have families responded to the role of the Whānau Support Worker in both the *Nursery* and *Preschool* centres?
- What impact has the role of the Whānau Support Worker had on children's learning and development in both the *Nursery* and *Preschool* centres?
- How have staff from the *Nursery* supported the *Preschool* staff in developing their research skills and attitudes?
- How has this process developed and supported research capabilities for the *Preschool* staff?

One of the main challenges for this research, as it was proposed, was to find a means to demonstrate how ‘support’ for families directly provided better outcomes for children in the *Nursery* and *Preschool*. The initial plan was also to spread the research focus from in the *Nursery* in the first year, to the *Preschool* in the following year, thus examining the wider impact of support within the *Citizens* early childhood centre complex and follow the Family Whānau Support Worker role in both settings. It was envisaged that the *Nursery* staff, once skilled in action research techniques, would work alongside the *Preschool* staff in the third year to undertake similar reflection on their teaching practices and support for parents.

The research began by documenting and recording the current situation with regard to family support, and its contribution to the early childhood education and care programme. For example, collecting data about the numbers of families directly accessing the Family Whānau Support Worker and the types of support being sought. The next stage of the research was to design different measures to evaluate improved outcomes for children, including ‘in the centre’ responses to the intervention, and any transfer to the children’s homes. It was proposed that these measures would also examine the coherence of the support across the centre as a whole and identify the different factors involved in any innovations. However, as in many journeys changes began while the ‘bags were still being packed’.

### **3.3 Packing the travel bags and confirming with travel companions: Signing the contracts and staff changes in an ECE context**

The first change to our research journey came soon after the signing of the Ministry of Education *COI* contract. Life changes occurred for several of the key planners of the ‘journey’: the Supervisor of the *Nursery* and *Preschool*, Senior Teacher of the *Nursery*, plus the *Child Services* Manager, followed shortly after by the Family Whānau Support Worker, all left *Citizens*. This change in ‘travel companions’ involved new staff joining into the team, and existing team members changing their position – new roles and responsibilities began for some members and all members experienced changed expectations. This, of course, meant that ‘take off’ for the journey was slowed considerably as the itinerary was reconsidered in light of new staff and new visions. This aspect of the journey continued to be both a

constraint and strength of this *COI*, as the team within *Citizens* has changed numerous times since 2004. See Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6:

**Table 3: Management Staff changes 2004-2007**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Date started and finished</b>
Dianne Sheridan-Darker	Child Services Manager	8-01-00 till 29-10-04
Karen Smith	Supervisor	20-01-03 till 12-04-05
Bobbie Parata	Supervisor	Begun 30-5-05
Shyami Fernando	Child Services Manager	28-02-05 till 25-09-06
Dianne Sheridan-Darker	<i>ChildWise</i> Manager	Returned begin 2007

**Table 4: Family Whānau Support Worker changes 2004-2007**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Date started and finished</b>
Jo Dagger	Advisory and Support	2-08-04 till 7-06-05
Maureen McKay	Family Whānau Support Worker	27-06-05 till 25-09-06
Jenny Gallacher	Social Work Placement Student	June to August 06
Sascha Scholz	Relieving Family Whānau Support Worker while Maureen was on medical leave	August 06-Jan 07
Tricia McLean	Family Whānau Worker	Begun 14-04-07

**Table 5: Teaching Staff Changes 2004-2007**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Date started and finished</b>
Ngaire Bygate	Head Teacher	1-02-99 till 1-4-05
Kylie Preedy	Senior Teacher (took on Senior Teacher position when Ngaire left)	12-06-00
Yvonne Quin-Evans	Teacher in Nursery	11-01-99 till 1-4-05
Jocelyn Mannex	Teacher in Nursery	13-01-03 till 2-12-05

Linda Thompson	Teacher in Nursery	1-04-06 till 23-02-07
Tinaka Kilgour	Teacher in Nursery	20-02-06 till 16-02-07
Amelia-Kate Keogh	Teacher in Nursery (moved to Preschool)	15-3-99 till 16-01-06
Jacqui King	Teacher in Nursery (moved to Preschool but continued to be involved in writing up and presenting of <i>COI</i> )	10-01-05 till 12-02-07
Kirsty Thomson	Teacher in Nursery	Begun 15-08-05
Raylene Redmond	Teacher in Nursery	Begun 27-03-07
Frances Brown	Teacher in Nursery	Begun 24-04-07
Nicola Thompson	Teacher in Nursery(moved from <i>Preschool</i> to <i>Nursery</i> )	Begun 12-02-07
Marilyn Lewis	Reliever in Nursery	Begun 2004

**Table 6: Research Associates 2004-2007**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Date Started and finished</b>
Michael Gaffney	Research Associate	Begun 2004
Judith Duncan	Research Associate	Begun 2004
Nicola Atwool	Research Associate	Feb 05 – Dec 05

The current Senior Teacher has been the only staff member from the proposal stage of the *COI*. With the return of Dianne Sheridan-Darker, an original planner of the journey and *ChildWise* Manager, some of the original intent of the research was able to be re-established in the third year. The changes in staff had the most pronounced impact on the *COI* research at the beginning of the three years, when energy and time were required to build up a completely new teaching team, and establish new management expectations. The teachers' reflections demonstrate the tensions between wishing to be involved in the research but also needing to put team building and relationships within *Citizen* as top priority:



Changing of staff has been an ongoing hurdle for the team throughout the duration of the research which has resulted in the team focussing on maintaining existing relationships within the centre with teachers, children and their families while endeavouring to maintain continuity and consistency for the children and their families at the forefront of our practice. This is particularly critical given that our research question has such a focus on relationships. To us the idea of a three-year action research was about continuity and bringing about changes. Therefore, the continual re-establishment of the team has left few people to reflect and contribute to the continuity of understanding over the three-year project. (*Citizens* Teacher reflection, 2007)

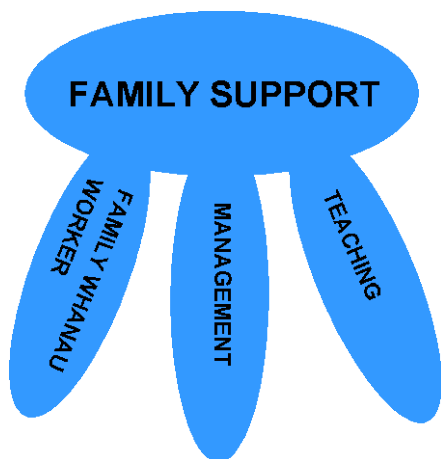
From the Research Associate perspective this time needed to supported very carefully:

Much of the time between learning of the success of the application to become a COI and completing the first research phase has centred on answering the question, '*What now?*'. There has been a certain amount of uncertainty for teachers who will have responsibility for completing the research but who were not central to the application's development. ...

For the researchers there has been a process of getting to know *Citizens* staff better and starting to get a feel for what is already happening in the *Nursery* with respect to the research question. We have been using this information to start to develop an idea of how and where we might begin the research. (*Research Associate* Reflection, 2005)

### 3.3.1 A rearranged itinerary

All of these changes led to 'narrowed' project, with a 'manageable' emphasis for *Citizens*. The travel itinerary was altered to concentrate on examining the practices within the *Nursery*, and not extending to the *Preschool*. The changing personnel employed in the Family Whānau Support Worker role also necessitated a shift in the ways we examined the impact of this role in support of families, as each change was



accompanied by a changed job description and vision. To assist our navigation of the landscape involved in this new journey we 'borrowed' the analogy of the 'the three-legged stool' based on the ideas of Bronfenbrenner (1979). We used this image to help frame the research investigations into support for families and children.

**Figure 3: The Research Framework**

The investigations became equally focused on:

1. The **Family Whānau Support Worker** and the intersection of the social welfare model and an early childhood community, with a role in family support and child outcomes;
2. **Teachers and Teaching Practices and Procedures.** This included both current practices and exploring changes and interventions into quality teaching practices that informed support for families and child outcomes;
3. **Management Policies, Procedures and Decision Making.** This 'leg of the stool' captured the decisions that were made as the Management Team reflected on individual families and teaching issues, and the wider *Methodist Mission* objectives, which create the underlying philosophies of the *Citizens Preschool and Nursery* early childhood complex.

The 'stool' framework prompted the research team to investigate connections between the aspects of teaching and learning which occur in the *Nursery*, and to take a broadly defined approach to investigating family support at the centre. Developing the 'stool' idea also helped the team to see where their area of responsibility for research tasks lay. This removed some of the anxiety to do with the breadth of the research focus.

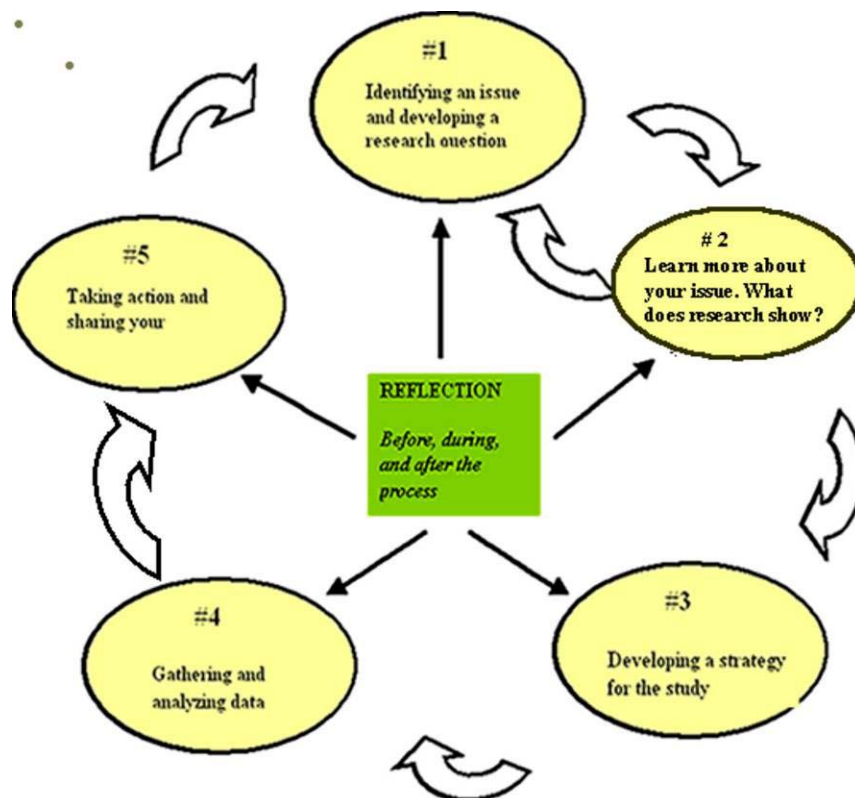
### **3.4 Travel underway: Action research as a tool for practitioners**

Action research has become one of the most regularly used methodological approaches in teacher/practitioner research. Areas of investigation have ranged from educational policies, to teacher practices and child behaviour! Action researchers are those who research their own practices and understandings. They may use similar methods to other researchers, including case studies, observation, document analysis, policy analysis, interviews and group discussion – depending on what is being investigated and understood. What makes action research different from other fields of research is not its methods per se, but the questions that are asked, who asks them and the intent for the outcomes of the research.

Cardno (2003), Carr and Kemmis (1986), MacNaughton (1996, 2001), and Ponte, Ax, Beijaard, and Wubbels, (2004) all argue that the design of action research

supports investigation, shared understandings, and a collaborative approach to undertaking change and innovation. Action research also encourages the continuing professional development of the teacher/researchers and others involved in the project. Action research can have transformative impact on teaching practices, as demonstrated in Duncan and Dalli's recently completed *TRLI* research with kindergarten teachers (Duncan et al., 2006), and the work of other *Centres of Innovation* (Meade, 2003, 2005, 2006).

While many action research models present the research in distinctive cycles, where the participants investigate one aspect of the situation, evaluate, decide on and take action and then evaluate again (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), the investigations during this research journey were more circular. Later steps led on from serendipitous explorations and findings. See Figure 4.



**Figure 4: Action Research: Accessed 2007:**  
**URL: [www.sitesupport.org/.../ses3\\_act1\\_pag1.shtml](http://www.sitesupport.org/.../ses3_act1_pag1.shtml)**

The *COI* team did not begin from a 'problem-based focus' but with an emphasis on deepening understanding from multiple perspectives; for example, the teachers and management, wished to have a clearer understanding of what support

looks like from a parents' perspective in an early childhood centre, what families actually find helpful and supportive, and which *Citizens Nursery* practices were supportive of families, including those of the Family Whānau Support Worker. Our action research moved fluidly between the stages of gathering and analysing, reflecting, developing and implementing actions and strategies and gathering more data. All aspects of this research involved deep reflection on the part of all the travel partners – management, teachers, Family Whānau Support Worker and research associates. Each stage, whether it was deciding on an issue to investigate or planning action (which could and often did happen simultaneously), was informed by reflection on understandings gained from either data, discussions or a sudden 'awakening' with regards to ideas missed or misunderstood from previous investigations. So, the research journey of *Citizens*, while drawing on action research as the philosophical basis for the methods, demonstrated a multiplicity of actions to enhance teaching practices and educational outcomes. We now call them "systematic serendipitous understandings and outcomes".

### **3.5 Clearing customs and negotiating take off: Planning methods and gaining University of Otago ethical approval**

Undertaking teacher-researcher projects involves a multi-layered shift in perspectives. 'Taken for granted' understandings about teaching and professional practices are suddenly 'under the spot light' from many perspectives: self, other teachers, research colleagues, and others in the service/organisation. In a *COI* project, teacher-researchers are also under a 'spot light' from the Ministry of Education, other early childhood colleagues and interested researchers, policy makers and scholars. Teacher-research in a *COI* is a very public encounter and therefore additional steps need to be put into place to ensure that teachers, children and families are protected from invasion into their privacy, in ways that early childhood centres do not usually have to. While all researchers must demonstrate ethical practice in all they do, the stakes are higher for those researchers who continue to have ongoing relationships outside of the research with their research participants, both during and after the research has been completed. *COI* projects are designed to be carried out over three years and to be made public to inform wider early childhood practice. Additional considerations and safe-guards to protect

relationships and privacy for teachers and families at *Citizens Nursery* needed to put in place.

These safe guards included: seeking consent from the parents for inclusion of their child and their family in the research; clarifying that parents did not have to have their child participate in the research to enable their child to attend the *Nursery*; reassuring parents that we would be clear with them as to what would count as research 'data' from the centre documentation that the staff usually maintain for professional purposes, and that additional consent would be requested from parents for making any of the documentation public. For example, for presentations and writing consent was re-sought from individual parents for the use of photos or other potentially identifying information. What became important as we began to work on developing the research ideas was that we had to make a distinction about when *Citizen* centre activities and practices might become part of the research, in contrast to usual day-to-day documentation.

A significant issue arising from the public nature of *CO/s* is that ethical research procedures usually require a guarantee of anonymity for all participants. However, as *COI* settings are publicly identifiable, and promulgated both nationally and internationally, the teachers, families and children within these centres cannot be assured of anonymity, even if identifying details such as photos and names are not used. Likewise, others involved in *Citizens* could be identified. Thus, research data, analysis, and dissemination has had to be treated very carefully to protect the privacy of children and families; the relationships between families, teachers and families, families and the Family Whānau Support Worker, and management; and the reputations of *Citizens* and all associated with the service.

An added complexity in this project was the intersection of the documentation of teachers with the documentation of the Family Whānau Support Worker. Information, concerning families and parents and children kept by the Family Whānau Support Worker had to be considered carefully and separately from the information kept by the teachers. Teachers did not have access to the Family Whānau Support Workers files or reflections. This information was discussed with the Research Associates only as required for the purposes of the research.

### **3.6 Travel guides – published and personal: Research associates and lots of reading**

The role of the research associate as a travel guide is crucial in the research journey. They act as the overall ‘tour guide’ to the journey, as well as the one with ‘local knowledge’ at the various ‘stop-overs’ and ‘diversions’ that occur along the trip. The ‘tour guiding’ that the research associates provided on this journey centred on the following tasks (See Appendix A for the Teachers and Research Associate agreement).

#### **3.6.1 Writing of the ethics application**

As the research associates for *Citizens*, Michael Gaffney and Judith Duncan, are both staff members at the *University of Otago*, the University’s Human Ethics Committee were sent an application detailing the intended research questions, methods, and considerations with regards to privacy, storage of data, publication of findings. In the application we indicated a range of methods that could be used once the project had begun. As part of this process the University required ‘Consultation with Maori’ whereby a summary of the research was also provided to the Ngāi Tahu Research Consultation committee. Once consent from the *University of Otago* had been given for our project (May 2005), we were able to ‘begin’ the *COI* journey – travel itinerary in hand, and with some, but not all, of the travelling companions who would join us over the three years.

#### **3.6.2 Regular meetings**

The entire research team (teachers from the *Nursery*, Family Whānau Support Worker, *Citizens* Management and the Research Associates) held an evening monthly meeting for the three years of the project. This was held at a usual staff meeting time, but dedicated solely to *Centre of Innovation* discussions and work. In addition a monthly meeting was held during the day between the *Nursery* Senior Teacher, Supervisor, Management, Family Whānau Support Worker and the Research Associate/s to discuss particular tasks being undertaken by the teachers and/or to support the team. On a more infrequent basis, meetings were held between a Research Associate and particular team members (for example, Family Whānau Support Worker, *Nursery* Senior Teacher) to discuss and develop research tools, discuss reflections and assist with other research related tasks. Regular

meetings were essential to maintain the impetus for research, amidst the ‘busyness’ of an early childhood programme, and to support the emerging confidence and capabilities of the teachers as teacher-researchers. In the second year when teachers spent time ‘off the floor’ and worked for blocks of time at the *Children’s Issues Centre* with the Research Associates. The travel dialogue was rich, full and daily and informed all levels of the research journey (see King et al., 2006).

### **3.6.3 Provision of readings and theoretical positioning**

Throughout the three years the Research Associates provided regular reading to enhance each aspect of the journey, particularly to support reflection, critical thinking and theoretical understanding. Alongside each set of readings questions to guide the reader were provided. Some evening meetings allocated time for discussion of the readings (See Appendix B for the list of readings provided for reflection for the research team).

### **3.6.4 Development of the research tools**

Being a ‘local’ in the research landscape enabled the Research Associates to translate research instruments into user-friendly tools for the early childhood context. Each research tool was developed by at least one of the Research Associates with one or more of the *Citizens* team. Over the three years the research skills of the teachers increased: by year three, the final interview questions for the parents were developed by the Senior Teacher, with only a slight reference to the ‘travel guide’ – a sure sign that the close assistance of the guide was no longer required!

### **3.6.5 Scaffolding dissemination and presentations – the travel slide show**

An obligation for the *Centres of Innovation* is to disseminate the research journey and outcomes as widely as possible to support improved quality ECE practices in other services. Again, the Research Associates, as ‘locals’ in the seminar and conference community, were able to assist the travel companions to explore the environs of presenting. Over the three years each ‘companion’ undertook to present at a Hui, Conference, Seminar or local ECE interest group. This continued to be the hardest aspect of the COI project for the teachers, but also a great stimulus for teaching practice. They reflect:

Presentations have not become any easier, contrary to popular belief, that the more you participate in them the easier they become. I don't believe I'll ever be able to talk off the top of my head, but as long I have the words in front of me I'll present if I have to. (*Citizens Teacher reflection, 2007*)

I have been given opportunities through COI to attend presentations, the biggest being the NZARE in Rotorua 2006. This was the most amazing experience that I don't think I would have been able to attend if I was not a part of COI. I met amazing people, other researchers, and teachers and major influential people in early childhood such as Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee. This was a major eye opener as to how lucky I am to be in a COI centre and what doors open with being involved in this. This also gave me new motivation as to why I became a teacher in the first place and took me back to how I wanted to become this teacher. (*Citizens Teacher reflection, 2007*)

### **3.6.6 Workshop days for analysis**

While the meetings with the full research team were most often at the end of a working day, there were several occasions when the intensity of the work needed fresh and energetic minds and more than a couple of hours. To do this three weekend days were set aside for analysis of data in April and December 2006, and May 2007. The whole team found these very useful days:

By having the meeting during a weekend day, the team felt it was valuable time to discuss, reflect and focus on the research, as a research team. It also enabled management to gain insight into the research.... This enabled the team to focus without the distractions of the week-day programme, routines and other priorities in the *Nursery*. The day included lots of brainstorming, and conversations based on and around the research which gave the team new motivation. (*Citizens teacher reflection, 2006*)

### **3.6.7 Tensions in the research associate participation in the research team**

As on any journey there are times that there are tensions amongst travelling companions, or when differences over which route should be taken arise.

The teachers reflected on how difficult it made their planning and direction when one or other of the travel guides (Research Associates) gave conflicting opinion on the best travel routes. The travellers also found the uncertainty surrounding the travel itinerary difficult to manage (what methods we would use, when data collection would be done or finished, who would do what in the different phases of the research), especially as change and uncertainty were occurring in their work place over 2005 and 2006. In hindsight the teachers' wished there had been a



more consistent approach from the Research Associates. Having to build relationships continually with the constantly changing staff and having to negotiate between the travel guides (the research associates) added to the, sometimes, overwhelming weight of being a COI:

A challenge for the centre's teachers has been the different learning and thinking styles not only in practice but also for COI. We as a team spent a good part of a year working on team building and relationships and the beginning of this year has been team consistency. I wonder now in hindsight if it would have been of value for the whole team if the research associates had been part of that team building. Their thinking processes are very different and have proven to be a challenge to all involved in COI because their directions and thought processes are often very different which leads to confusion amongst the teacher researchers. Having different ways of thinking and learning has meant we challenge each other and this works effectively when we work in small groups but not so effectively when working alone because when someone takes over and there hasn't been the face to face hand over it's difficult sometimes to pick up on the previous persons thought process. (*Citizens Teacher Reflection, 2006*)

Which brings me to another point of too 'many cooks in the kitchen'? This I found most of the time, one person would see us heading one way and the other person would see a totally other vision. This was very confusing and most of the time we are getting spoken to by one person at a time so, who were we supposed to listen to? (*Citizens Teacher Reflection, 2006*)

The Research Associates were also faced with these same challenges, working with a constantly changing team and seeing their role as travel *guides* rather than tour *producers*. A Research Associate reflects:

As research associates we were faced with a number of challenges, the foremost being the change of key members at *Citizens*.... In many ways the only ongoing voice was that of the research associates, but it was not our place to create a vision for the service – yet trying to research something as fundamental as family support meant exploring people's ideas about what the service was about. In the end it did mean that we were often asking questions of the team to reaffirm what the *Nursery* team might be trying to achieve and making reference to what we considered elements of good practice.

In that sense, the research associates were engaged in what we would consider a form of *professional development*. The team had to be working effectively for us to get the research underway, but at the same time we were using the research to get the team working together. We would not expect that a well-established team would have had to go through this process to the same extent.

There were some advantages, however, in that we could ask ‘how are you currently doing such and such?’ without necessarily challenging years of ‘taken for granted’ practices. The new team members were very happy to think through elements of their practice and consider new directions that could include a research component. (*Research Associate reflection, 2006*)

### 3.7 Choosing the sights: The enacted research

To answer our research questions, the investigations into family support developed as we examined the multiple perspectives on support in the early childhood education centre. This is where our approach, which began with systematic enquiry, generated serendipitous understandings and outcomes. They both lead to our interventions and/or evolved from our interventions and strategies. For the purposes of this chapter the investigations and interventions are reported separately, but in reality these happened in a circular, and interrelated fashion, occurring either at the same time or in a sequence. *Citizens COI* did not adhere to a typical research trajectory (see Figure 5): hence, our ‘systematic serendipitous understandings’ of what counts as support for families.

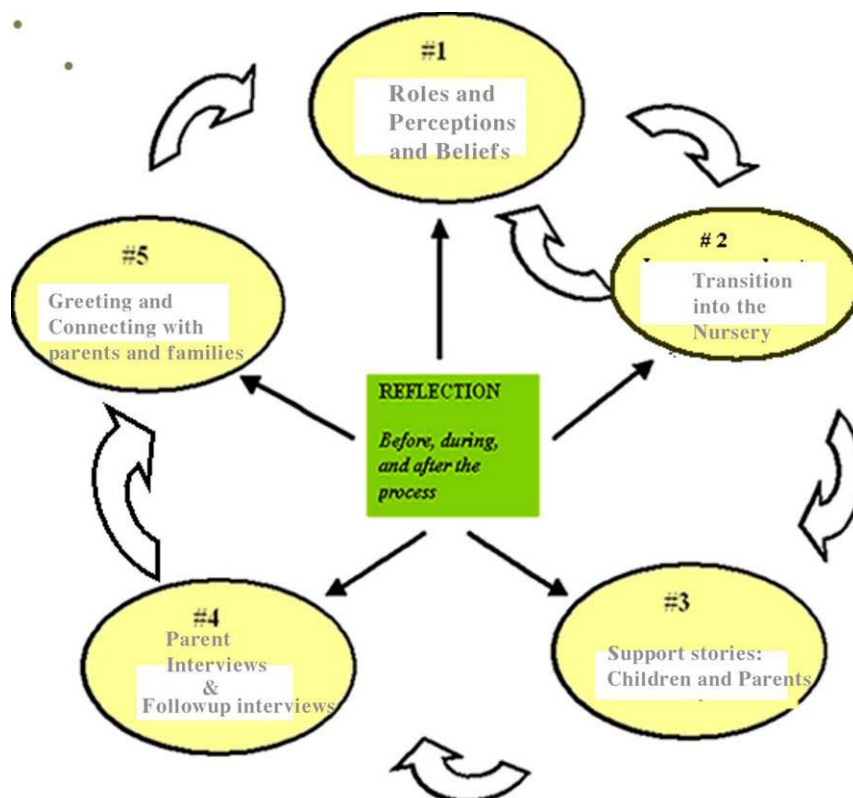


Figure 5: The research methods: Investigations

### 3.7.1 Roles and perceptions and beliefs

Our first investigation took the shape of interrogating the teams' own understandings about 'what counts as support'. This formed our preliminary data, as well as defining new roles and relationships for the *Citizens* travellers. Later 'transition' and 'support stories' also fed into this examination of the 'taken for granted' notions, and the underlying beliefs and philosophies which shaped the practices in the *Nursery*. Investigation of roles, perceptions and beliefs about support occurred through all the three years of this project.

### 3.7.2 Transition into the *Nursery*

This was chosen as a topic because of its high level of interest by teachers. The transition into the *Nursery* was seen as a time to form positive relationships with families and provide the basis for later family support. It was also seen as a critical point for the introduction of the Family Whānau Support Worker to the families and children as part of the family support process. Several different methods were used to investigate and reflect on this first transition into *Citizens* for both the children and their families.

- a) Teachers **documented** the current procedures and practices that occurred in the *Nursery* when a child/family first began.
- b) A **reflective questionnaire** was developed for the teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker to answer (see Appendix C). The questionnaire was designed to get the research team to reflect individually on the lived impact of the centre's current procedures and practices.
- c) The **results from the questionnaire** were collated and then represented back to the research team for further reflection. The ensuing discussions led the teachers to decide to look more closely at individual children as 'case studies' over their transition time into the *Nursery*, so we could begin to interrogate the 'taken for granted' notions that became apparent in the questionnaire responses; for example, what did 'a settled child' actually mean?
- d) **Transition stories** were collectively written for each child in the *Nursery*. Each teacher took the responsibility for a child and began the story. Other

teachers, Supervisor and the Family Whānau Support Worker added contributions if they had contact with the particular child or family.

e) **Reflective questions** were provided to the team by the Research Associates to strengthen the transition stories (See Appendix D). These questions were adapted from O'Connor and Diggins (2002, p. 52) and were used to guide further professional reflection about the transition stories. The benefits of these reflective questions became immediately apparent in teachers' writing: "Our earlier narratives are noticeably different to our more recent ones, in that we are now focused on including what is relevant and as a team we are clearer about what that might be" (*Citizens teacher reflections, 2006*).

### **3.7.3 What counts as support: Support stories**

Following on from the transitions stories and the reflections our journey examined the every-day practices of the *Nursery* and made the Family Whānau Worker, Management, and teachers look more closely at 'support'. This led to the writing of support stories, in a similar way to the transition stories. The difference was that these stories were discussed between the teacher-on-COI-release with the teacher who had written the story. This added a deeper analysis than occurred when writing individually. Once a number of the stories had been completed, they were analysed for the emerging themes.

Once this was completed, the 'travellers' developed interviews to gain parental perspectives on support. The questions were informed by the understandings collated from the both the transition and the support stories, questions raised by the new teachers as they joined *Citizens*, and questions asked by the Research Associates.

### **3.7.4 Parent interviews and follow-up interviews**

We became aware that what was missing from our data about support were the parents' perspectives:- what counted as support for the parents who had children enrolled in the *Nursery*? Research interviews were held with willing parents.

a) *First interview with parents:*

All the parents at the *Nursery* were invited to participate in an interview with the Family Whānau Support Worker. Having the Family Whānau Support Worker interview the parents served two purposes: 1) parents may feel less constrained in discussing their experiences of the staff and the procedures and practices of the *Nursery* with someone slightly removed from the setting; 2) the new Family Whānau Support Worker could introduce herself to the parents, positioning herself within the *Nursery*.

Seventeen parents consented to the interview and the interviews were carried out over July to August of 2007. The Family Whānau Support Worker and a social work student on placement in the Family Whānau Worker's absence, carried out the interviews in the Family Room at *Citizens*. Both spent time with a Research Associate practising interviewing techniques, as the style of communication is very different from the Family Whānau Support Worker's usual dialogue with parents:

[Family Whānau Support Worker] has found that conducting the interviews was beneficial in building on relationships while creating new ones with others; however she did find that the interviews occur at a different level providing a more formal conversation rather than the informal communication she had previously been using. (*Citizen's* teacher, personal communication, 2006)

The interviews asked parents about: transition into the *Nursery*, what practices and procedures they found supportive for themselves and their child/ren, and their perspective on the Family Whānau Support Worker role (See Appendix E).

The interviews ranged between 12 minutes to 50 minutes each. Each interview was transcribed by a professional transcriber, in the employ of the Children's Issues Centre, and once transcribed, were collated into books for the teachers to read and to begin to analyse.

To protect the identity of each of the parents as the interviews were collated, identifying details were removed (names, dates, specific examples that would be matched to a particular child/ren), and the transcripts were cut and pasted in a random order under each research question so that no pattern of answers could be

construed from the booklets; that is, no parent's answers could be continuously tracked and thus identified. This had the advantage of protecting the parent's identity to a degree, but had the disadvantage of removing some key examples to inform professional practice. Similarly, the teachers wondered if some parents had expressed sentiments in a particular way more than others (for example, did all of the parents like a particular practice? Or was it just a few who mentioned the practice more than once in their transcript?). The Research Associate who had constructed the booklets was able to contextualise the interviews and thus minimise some of the concerns that the teachers raised.

#### *b) Follow-up interviews*

A second round of interviews were designed to engage with parents over the interventions and strategies that had been put into place as a result of the first interviews. The questions arose from these changes. To know how families were experiencing these changes we needed to ASK them. The Senior Teacher designed the questions and verbally asked as many of the parents as she could over a period of weeks. Rather than digitally recording these interviews, the teacher wrote responses down or gave the questions to the families to take home and complete in writing. The follow-up interviews provided valuable feedback to the staff over the effectiveness and usefulness of the changes to the programme.

### **3.7.5 Recording teacher/parent connections**

We decided to further investigate individual connections that had been made between teachers and families, at the same time as ensuring that each family DID have a meaningful connection with at least one of the teachers. To begin with we examined the types of relationships that have developed between teachers and parents. After initial discussions where teachers discussed their 'general perceptions' the teacher who was 'off-the-floor' created a chart for teachers to rate the level of relationships already built in the *Nursery*. This teacher-researcher also worked with the Family Whānau Support Worker to create a chart to monitor her relationships with parents from the *Preschool* and *Nursery*. The charts used key categories for organising the information:

*Teachers:*

1. Do you know their faces?
2. Confident with *Nursery* focused discussions?
3. Confident sharing wider information?
4. Do the parents feel confident approaching you – with no other teachers around or with other teachers around?

Space was also made to allow for comments such as whether teachers already had a developed relationship with the family from outside the centre.

*Family Whānau Support Worker:*

Making myself available to offer support is about:

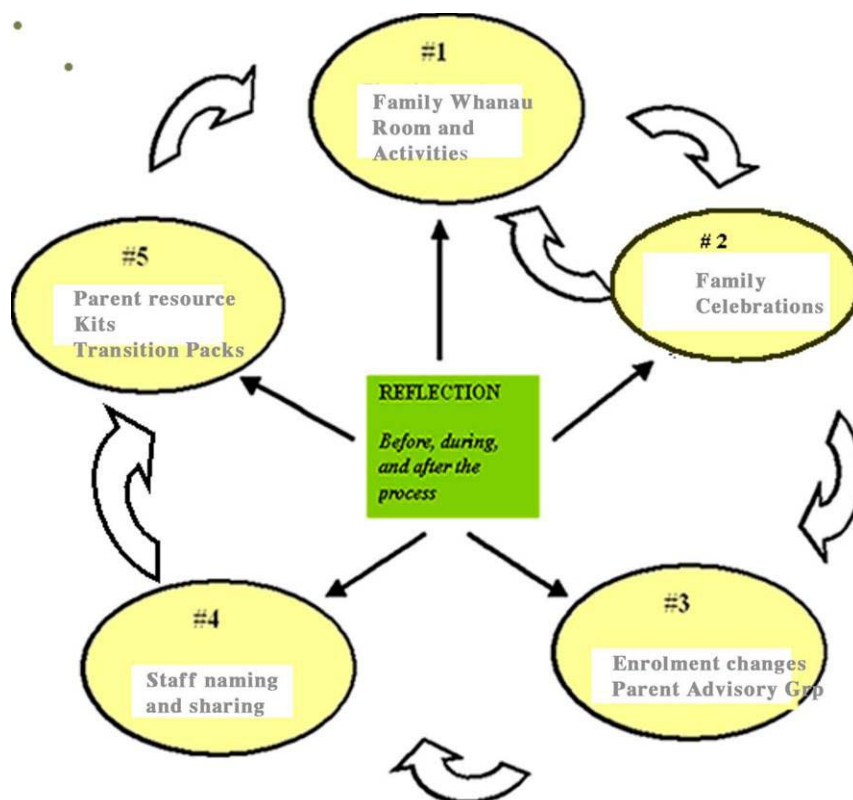
1. Being there and being seen;
2. Taking an interest;
3. Making time to talk;
4. Building bridges.

Completed charts were analysed to see the roles and relationships that were in place for the families in the *Nursery*.

Therefore, with the travelling well underway, the next choice for this journey was to design the appropriate strategies and interventions to transport the travellers for the rest of the *COI* itinerary.

### **3.8 Choosing the transport: How the research journey was carried out**

Action research involves intervening and acting on the understandings that are gained from the investigations. For the *Citizens COI* research journey we chose a range of transport to carry out our strategies and interventions. Many came about as a direct result of a new insight or when the timing for intervening made sense to fit with occurrences in the centre at the time (for example, before the Family Whānau Support Worker took extended leave in 2006). Some were even initiated in the middle of an investigation. A short overview is provided here to demonstrate the multiplicity of vehicles for intervention and discovery. See Figure 6:



**Figure 6: The interventions: Activities and happenings**

### 1. Family Whānau Room

A prefab in the playground of the *Preschool* at *Citizens Preschool and Nursery* was set aside for the use as a Family Whānau room. Housed in the room is a wide range of resources gathered by the Family Whānau Support Workers, over the three years, for relevant information for families. They include pamphlet and web based sources. Parents have access to this room and can use the internet on the computer. The Family Whānau Support Worker also uses the room for talking with parents and for private telephone consultations.

### 2. Family Celebration

An evening was held to celebrate the families at *Citizens*. The teachers and Family Whānau Support Worker had been looking for ways to build on their relationships with families. The family celebration evening was designed to give the families a chance to spend more time in the *Nursery* and strengthen connections with the people and environment that their children spend their days in and around. It also was a good opportunity for parents to informally meet teachers from the *Preschool* to assist when transitioning children.



After the evening the teachers engaged with a series of reflective questions posed by the Senior Teacher regarding the family celebration. They were:

Think about the whole day and the events: -

- What you felt went well and what you felt didn't and why;
- What changes would you make to the day and why;
- Any parent comments and who said them;
- Reflect on whether you were rostered on or not, and whether being rostered worked in terms of the running of the programme in the centre;
- How the centre worked individually and as a team.

The teachers reported:

The teachers found these prompts helpful in terms of thinking about the day; the prompts allowed the teachers to be more on target with reflecting rather than just describing what happened. The teachers found they were able to pull more out from their initial writings and add more to their reflective comments. The teachers also said they enjoyed having the time to focus on the day and to think about it while writing about the family celebration. (*Citizens teacher reflection, 2006*)

The *Celebrating Families* event led to two other key interventions: 1) a substantial change to the information sheet that families filled out about the child/ren when they began at the *Nursery* (the "All about ME" sheet; and 2) an establishment of a family/staff wall collage where families and staff were encouraged to share pictures and information about themselves— building a community of families. (See following chapters for further discussion on these actions).

### 3. Management Interventions

Running alongside the teaching strategies in the centre, reflection at the management level continued in parallel through the project. The key changes continued to evolve through the three years:

- a) Updating and changing of the enrolment forms and the information that is provided in the enrolment packs for new families and the packs for families transitioning from the *Nursery* into the *Preschool*.

- b) The establishment of a Parent Advisory Group for *Citizen Preschool and Nursery*.

#### 4. Staff Naming and Sharing

The team began to share more about themselves and their own families with the families from the *Nursery*. As mentioned above they began the family wall collage where each teacher created a leaf for the family tree:

The family collage is also to show the teachers as people, and invite the families to see part of our lives outside of the centre environment. The teacher family collages have been received positively once the parents have had the time to look at them. Feedback from parents has been one of interest and that it is a good idea. It has also encouraged parent/teacher conversation with families seeing the interests of the teachers that are in common with their own families. Some of the parents have relationships with people they recognise in the collages, while others have enjoyed looking at the interests of the teachers, this alone has created conversations. (*Citizen teacher reflection, 2006*)

In a response to the parent interviews all the staff at *Citizens* also began to wear name labels, and to publicly display their names and positions at *Citizens* on the whiteboard placed outside the entrance to the *Nursery* where notices for the day names of relievers and students were added.

#### 5. Parent Resource Kits

In response to the understandings gained through *COI* investigations and ongoing conversations with parents, the *Nursery* staff developed information resource kits around key concerns frequently discussed with parents. These kits were given to parents who had expressed interest in these areas. The first two kits developed were on supporting toilet training, and the transition from the *Nursery* to the *Preschool*.

### **3.9 The key to travel: Taking the time to experience the trip**

In the busy life of teachers to add research to the day can be a challenging experience for teachers, families and children. Over the three years different approaches to assisting teachers for 'off-the-floor' time was trialed (see King, Thomson, Kilgour, Thompson & Preedy, 2006 for a full account of this process). Initially each teacher in the *Nursery* was released, one teacher at a time, for an hour a week to engage in reading and preparation for the journey. Then we discovered

that two teachers at the same time promoted discussion and enabled more data to be gathered. Including the Family Whānau Support Worker was also beneficial. Once the investigations began the teachers began to have two hours a week together to collate the transition and support stories and reflect on the themes. However, in 2006, finding the 'time' for research became more difficult for the team, with more staff changes and new staff who were beginning teachers. Taking research release time physically at *Citizens* was often difficult with many interruptions and calls back 'onto-the-floor'. Early in 2006 an additional teacher was employed in the *Nursery* to assist with *COI* teacher release, and blocks of release time was circulated around the staff. Each teacher (with the exception of the Senior Teacher) worked at the *Children's Issues Centre* (CIC) with the research associates for a 3-4 week block. There the teacher would work on research related tasks, for example, milestone reports, collation of teacher transition and support stories, creating PowerPoint slides for presentations. When at *Citizens* each week this teacher-researcher would work alongside the other teachers in gathering of data and observing 'on-the-floor'. Each released-teacher played a pivotal role in supporting reflective conversations and continuity in thinking and investigation.

While one teacher was released to work at the CIC and gather data at *Citizens* the rotation of the other teachers continued with each teacher still having their two hours a week on the *COI* project. The Senior Teacher was released for a day a week (on site) for the project. Her involvement was constrained by her responsibilities in the centre that her position demanded.

The teachers reflect on this form of 'travelling' (see also King et al., 2006):

I found it hard to be away from the children for that long and I missed some of my profile children's milestones. However, I did find it beneficial for concentrating on Centre of Innovation tasks and getting things completed and sent away to the Ministry of Education. I can see the benefits of having a full three week block compared to having the normal two hours a week. It gives the teachers time to concentrate and think about different aspects of transition and ICT. With having only two hours, it sometimes feels like it is not long enough to discuss and analyse in the in-depth way that is more useful. It gives us one focus when we are not counted as part of the staff/child ratios and gives the particular staff member responsibility for any paper work that has to be completed. (*Citizens* teacher reflection, 2006)

Reflection questions I will ask:

- What was the hardest part of going back onto the floor?
- Did you feel unsure of what was going on?
- Did you feel like you missed out on information?
- Did you feel your profile children missed out?
- Did you find it hard to catch up on work (your planning etc.)
- What do you think would help solve some of these problems?
- Did you find it hard to bond with the rest of the team? (*Citizens* teacher reflection, 2006)

Since the start of the three-week block of release time to carry out *Centre of Innovation* research, staff have been dealing with a stir of emotions around how this has affected the programme for the children and teachers running the programme. Staff found it hard getting used to being away from the centre where they were feeling isolated from the parents, children and their profile work on individual children. (*Citizens* teacher reflection, 2006)

### **3.10 Destination ETA: Report writing and finalising thinking**

Though we have had our struggles as a team, I believe *COI* has brought the team closer. We have become more questioning and reflective of our practice as individuals and a team and we have gained a shared understanding on why we do things the way we do and what makes us different as a *Nursery* centre. I believe it has enabled the teachers to be able to explain why they do certain things and what the benefits are for the children and families. They are better able to justify their practices to the children, families, their peers, to other professionals and themselves.

It has enabled us to strengthen and build on practices and given us permission to try something new. This would have happened without *COI* but not as thoroughly and in as much depth. *COI* has honed our reflective practices so much it is now second nature.

Therefore, our journey is continuing and in many ways now it has begun it will continue forever. (*Citizens* teacher reflection, 2007)

While the writing the final report brings the journey to an end, it is not the end as envisaged when the first travelling companions embarked on this endeavour. Before the trip even began our travelling companions changed which necessitated changes in routes, itinerary, menus and timelines. The increased energy and time needed to establish, re-establish, re-negotiate and recreate teams (both teaching and research) impacted not only on the timeline for the research journey, but ultimately on what did and did not become possible to investigate. While the planning of this journey had proposed a three-year investigation which would include the *Preschool*

in the third year, the actual three-year journey kept the travellers closer to home, reflecting and investigating family support in the *Nursery*, drawing on several strands of evidence (Family Whānau Support Worker, Management, Teachers and Parents) and their perspectives, as well as those of the Research Associates.

The research question which this report addresses which our combined research has investigated is:

**What counts as support for families from a childcare centre that actively works with parents and children?**

While this three-year research journey may have 'landed', the journey of supporting children and families and the constant reflection on and passion to practice quality early childhood education and provide meaningful support for families will continue at *Citizens Preschool and Nursery*.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Investigation One: The Family Whānau Support Worker, Citizens Preschool And Nursery's Innovation**

#### **4.1 Introduction: The Family Whānau Support Worker position based at an early childhood centre**

As discussed in Chapter One, the idea of a social worker based at an early childhood centre, had its beginnings from 2002 and the roles and responsibilities for this position have continued to evolve. This 'position' has changed within the centre, both in response to management and organisational changes and philosophies, but also to changing family and community needs at the same time reflecting the personal philosophies of the person in the role. This has provided both opportunities and constraints as the role and the tasks have been negotiated, redesigned, begun and then renegotiated again several times. This chapter discusses the development of the role and position within *Citizens Preschool and Nursery* of the Family Whānau Support Worker and the shift in thinking and practices which have accompanied these changes in roles. Our *COI* research has been descriptive, covering the lessons learned, and the borders that have been crossed for the two professions – teaching and social work – to successfully work together within the shared community of children and families.

#### **4.2 The title: A reflection of philosophies**

***Social Worker* < *Advice and Support Worker* < *Family Whānau Support Worker***

A title, or a name, signals a message that reflects intent. The changing titles of the role of the social worker within *Citizens* mirrored the changing development of the understanding of the role within the early childhood community, the values and aspiration of *Methodist Connect*, the teaching community of practice at *Citizens*, and the backgrounds and beliefs of the individual social workers. However, while the titles may have changed the intent of having a trained professional social worker as the holder of the position at the centre has been essential to the position.

#### 4.2.1 Title One: *Advice and support worker*

While the new position was for a social worker within the early childhood setting, there was a philosophical resistance to using the term “social worker”, even though this term is used in other education settings, for example, ‘Social Workers in Schools’ initiative (Belgrave et al., 2002), and at the *Aratupu Early Childhood Centre* in Christchurch. Previous experience of the *Dunedin Methodist Connect*, where parents had been apprehensive when they heard the term ‘social worker’ led to a shift in thinking of title for the position. The early childhood teaching staff also did not want the parents to align teachers with perceptions of *Child, Youth and Family* services either (i.e. social welfare services). From discussion with the teachers and the centre supervisor it was decided that ***Advice and Support Worker*** was a more user-friendly term to describe the role<sup>1</sup>.

The resistance to the title of ‘social worker’ was also an indicator of a commitment that moved beyond seeing support as viable through only one paradigm, social work, to a holistic educational way of working. *Citizens* staff, privileging a strong educational theoretical stance to parent support, rather than a social work approach, was the starting point for *Citizens*. This was in contrast to the other *Methodist Mission’s* centre based in Christchurch. The stance was deliberate and had been reinforced after a visit by senior staff and management to the programme already undertaken at *The Christchurch Methodist Mission’s* centre *Aratupu*, which had operated for six years with a social worker. The *Citizens* staff and management made several visits to *Aratupu* in Christchurch to see how this centre operated with their social worker on site<sup>2</sup>. While there were many valuable insights and lessons learned, the *Citizens* staff decided that they did not wish to be a direct copy. Services in Dunedin needed to be relevant to *Citizens* own community.

The *Aratupu* model was declined and labels directly imported from the social work paradigm were also resisted. For example, terms such as clients, cases, and

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<sup>1</sup> This position was filled temporarily by a social work postgraduate student on a University of Otago placement, while further discussion and investigation around the needs of the community was carried out (see Chapter One).

<sup>2</sup> We wish to acknowledge the guidance and welcome that the staff from *Aratupu* have provided to the staff from *Citizens* as ongoing visits have been made over the last four years

assessments or evaluations were perceived to position the parent and families into the casework model which would alienate parents. Other terms which are more family-friendly and appropriate to an early childhood education setting were adopted:



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** I've never really liked that word [client]. Never. It puts a kind of a stigma on people....We don't have clients here. We have families. So that was easy for me to not take that on because I don't like that – that word 'client'.... [In comparison] we give them a service and we try to make that the best possible service that we can give them. So if you needed to give them a title I'd call them a 'customer' but I just talk about 'families'.



**Research Associate:** So tell me what you see the difference is.



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** The difference is that I'm working with healthy families. Mostly healthy families. And when they just have a little wee veer off the line then it's my job to identify what we can do to get it back to there. And I don't think that's case work because I'd have to – if you talk about case work you're talking about constantly being with like....: It's very – it's very social work...what's your case, you know, what's your caseload?...How many clients have you got at the moment and...? And I said that to [Management] right at the start, you've got to stop using that social work language 'cause it frightens our families. (Conversation, 2008)

Moving from a sole traditional social work discourse had been important from the conception of the position and this has contributed to the success of the position for both parents and teachers at *Citizens*.

#### 4.2.2 Title Two: Family Whānau Support Worker

“A rose by any other name”

Following on from the South Dunedin research project (see Chapter One), the commitment was made by *Methodist Connect* (then the *Dunedin Methodist Mission*) to make a formal appointment to the **Advice and Support role**. Soon after the first appointee started the name was changed to 'Family Whānau Support Worker' to reflect the emerging commitment to Te Ao Māori within *Citizens Preschool and*



*Nursery*, and to signal the holistic approach to support and development in the early childhood settings.



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** [The parents] ... all know what I am. Call it by any other name, but they all know I'm the social worker. And I'm sorry I couldn't stop that. I tried to stop it and 'a rose by any other name'. So I've had people saying to me: "You're a social worker aren't you?" And I say: "yes". Quite tentatively. And they go: "Good 'cause I need help with...". So slowly, although we're still – I'm still the Whānau Support Worker, they know in their head why my role is. Whereas, I think it was quite confusing up until when I have my catch-ups<sup>3</sup> and I talk about what I'm allowed to do for them and I give them my brochure and we talk about that. They know and, you know, our families aren't silly, they know that role no matter what the title. What does that title mean and when they find out that I'm not spying on them and I'm not going to report them to CYFS.

While the title of the position showed *Methodist Connect* had a holistic approach to parent support, in contrast to stereotypical views of 'social workers', the parents themselves could choose to see the position as one aligned with the social work skills that they need at any time, or as another 'ear', in addition to the teachers', for a chat.

In the parent interviews, undertaken in 2006, (see Table 7) we asked the parents what their perception of the Family Whānau Support Worker role was. The dominant understanding of the position was a person where parents went for help in times of personal or familial trouble. While some parents understood the role of the Family Whānau Support Worker they said that they did not feel they would benefit from the type of support she was offering. Their perceptions of this position were still too closely aligned with the 'social work' model to encourage a wider more holistic approach to parent support and community development. See Table 7 for selected comments from parents.

While being available for times of crisis is a legitimate role and function of the support role, this was not envisaged as its main or only role.

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<sup>3</sup> The Family Whānau Support Worker visits families after they have been attending at the centre for eight weeks. Refer to 4.4.2.1 for a full discussion of this 'catch-up'.

**Table 7:**  
**Selected parents' perceptions of the purpose for the Family Whānau Support Worker at Citizens Preschool and Nursery (2006)**

<p><b>Parent 1:</b> I mean it may suit some people to have the third party to come in and be involved ... if there's any problems ... that would be great if you felt like you couldn't talk to the staff member or something along those lines.</p>
<p><b>Parent 2:</b> I don't really know what your role entails, so. 'Cause we read in the newsletter ... Well, when it said family support, to me that was like if there was abuse or – you know, that's the side I took, that sort of thing.</p>
<p><b>Parent 3:</b> I have had people say: oh go talk to [Family Whānau Support Worker]. Oh I can't remember what it was about – oh, it was the money thing... So that's why I will have assumed you were an office – more of an office person, or you know. Not an office person, but you know, more of the running side of things.</p>
<p><b>Parent 4:</b> You know, I – how I see a family support person is if you're having problems or you're worried about something that's who you go and talk to.</p>
<p><b>Parent 5:</b> Well, that's hard to say because I don't think we've been in a situation where we've really needed support and all that. I guess it's based on a case-to-case situation. We've been rather fortunate.</p>
<p><b>Parent 6:</b> I guess I've always thought as a Whānau worker as one of those ones that to me never sort of really fits in. I mean it's – I think it's more of another administration person to help in some way. I do realise she does do other things that I wouldn't even know about and WINZ and, you know, people have things that they need to do and address, but probably for me no.</p>
<p><b>Parent 7:</b> I know all the [teaching] staff give support if there's like problems or anything like that, so they give enough support for me so. Yeah.</p>

## 4.3 Underway for the Family Whānau Support Worker

### 4.3.1 Introducing a Family Whānau Support Worker to an early childhood education site

As discussed in Chapter One, the introduction of this position was in response to the perceived needs of the community, as well as to address the workloads of the staff and to remove situations that were outside their professional responsibilities and their training levels. The following conversation between a *Citizens Manager* and a Research Associate demonstrates the tensions however, in ‘letting go’ when teachers have always been the ones that have tried to ‘do it all’ for their families, and who had come to see it as part of their job.



**Manager:** The key ideas [behind the position] were to address concerns that teachers were having with not being able to give parents information they required and they didn't have the resources or know where to go for it.....There were [a large number of] children who required extra support. I mean plus the usual daily concerns that were within the community. Our centre is in a low-socio economic area where poverty was a general concern....It was hard for teachers who wanted to do the social work role, as well as their teaching, and there was conflict between teachers at the beginning. A lot of teachers want to do both roles.



**Research Associate:** Okay. So where's the line?



**Manager:** Where's the line? The line is: I am not qualified to...give you certain information because although I think I might know, I could jolly well wrong be and then I haven't had the training in that area so I'm better not to go there and confuse you with patchy or incorrect information.



**Research Associate:** Can you give me an example? Like?



**Manager:** Like domestic violence....Child protection....Housing, emergency housing, help – help with getting to Housing New Zealand, Work and Income subsidies, accessing food parcels.



**Research Associate:** Teachers are often asked those things?



**Manager:** ...Yeah and we did too, initially we did too, and it got too hard [to 'do it all']. It got that you couldn't do either role [teaching or supporting] their many needs properly. Like you can't do everything, you just can't....Because [the teachers] liked the contact with the parents and it didn't matter how much the contact went, which way it went, they still like to be there. And it's exciting getting somebody a result....It's rewarding. But it's not so rewarding if it goes wrong. And that's a safety sort of issue where the boundaries come in – boundaries of social work practice and teaching practice. (Conversation, 2008)

Supporting teachers to engage in their roles and the Family Whānau Support Worker to engage in the social work roles, was designed to enable safe and effective practices for all involved. However, for teachers who have often found themselves 'needed' in support roles for families, as part of their every-day teaching, a transition to 'letting go' and passing it to someone else involved building trust and communication for themselves in the first instance with the Family Whānau Support Worker before ensuring that parents themselves are supported in the transition to making relationships with the Family Whānau Support Worker. As the role of Family Whānau Support Worker had been an unfamiliar one for the early childhood teaching team the transition when introducing the position to the early childhood staff and the parents demonstrated the importance of clarity of roles and open communication for all the staff at *Citizens*.

The introduction processes for the individuals who were taking on the position of the Family Whānau Support Worker has differed over the three years of the research. The results from the *COI* research and the prior experiences of each appointee were used to smooth each new appointee's transitions into an early childhood setting.

#### 4.3.2 Investigation: Clarity of purpose and role: Vision and practices

The importance of **clarity of purpose and role** from the very beginning of employment, for a Family Whānau Support Worker, was made apparent when we asked the teachers in 2005 what they thought should be the role of the Family Whānau Support Worker. Collated, the teachers' views demonstrated considerable confusion and lack of clarity surrounding the boundaries between professional teaching roles and responsibilities, and social work professional roles and responsibilities. This created a climate where teachers felt undermined in their work with families and this was a barrier to building a 'team approach' with the Family Whānau Support Worker to support families. (See Table 8 for selected teacher responses). For example: In discussing roles teachers identified that the role of the Family Whānau Support Worker was to observe children's development, and free teachers to talk with parents BUT NOT to be involved in supporting relationships between family members and the centre. Thus, these responses indicated limited understanding as to the possibilities for the Family Whānau Support Worker. As well the responses served to 'safe guard' the teachers' own 'patch'. Yet they confused the Family Whānau Support Worker tasks with educational practices that were the domain of teachers – observing and monitoring children's development. The role that the teachers identified for themselves in *COI* data was embedded in the relationships with children and family members. They did not necessarily expect, or want, the Family Whānau Support Worker to take on the sorts of relationships with families and children that teachers have.

The teacher's role in developing and keeping positive relationships would be to always be approachable and cheerful when speaking with the families/Whānau, continue to give them good feedback/ anecdotes of what has been happening for their child each day. Being there for the families/Whānau to discuss any issues that they may have on a day-to-day basis and getting to know each family/Whānau. (A *Citizens* teacher's response to role of teachers)

At the same time we asked the Family Whānau Support Worker to review what she thought the role of the Family Whānau Support Worker should be after she had been working in the role for several months. Her responses centred on becoming familiar with the children both to ensure ease of talking with the parent, and to notice changes in behaviour which may indicate problems that need investigating. She also

outlined practical assistance for parents in information and subsidy applications. It was apparent that the Family Whānau Support Worker was looking to develop positive relationships with the families and children. But the purpose or outcome of these relationships was different. Her focus was about gathering information to identify if support might be necessary and providing information that was supportive. Interestingly, this focus on observing children and noticing behavioural issues indicated a lack of clarity of role by the Family Whānau Support Worker at this time. This conflation of her role with teaching duties was evident in the Family Whānau Support Worker's own reflections in 2006 as she began to position herself in the Nursery:



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** In getting to know parents they will assume that I am there in a teaching role. This includes assuming that I can take on the information for the day and pass it onto teachers about what has been happening in the child's life that might affect their day. Do I have to let people know that I will have to pass it on because I am not a teacher at the centre for the day? Or should I be asking them to hold that info and pass it on to one of the teachers there at the time? If they are flowing (in their discussion) and the parent is relieved to have got the info shared, it is one less thing to think about for the day and they don't want to have to repeat it again, especially if they are in a rush. This seems to be a common feature of people dropping off (their children). It is part of the whole list of things that must be done to 'drop off' a child. This is all part of creating a role for the family worker in the minds of parents and how the other staff would like me to fit in here.

**Table 8:  
Selected responses from teachers on the role of the  
Family Whānau Support Worker**

**Question One:** Identify what role(s) the Family Whānau Support Worker plays in settling the family/whānau into the nursery.

- Interacting with the children to get to know them and their progress
- Helping with situations of behavioural concern with children and parents
- Supporting parents and children to feel at ease when starting at the centre
- Provide support for queries re benefits and extra information

**Question Two:** What role would you like the Family Whānau Support Worker to play that is not happening yet?

- Increased involvement in enrolment processes – take over the paper work so that Nursery staff can concentrate on the explaining the practices and routines of the Nursery
- Visit with the children in the nursery so the children can become familiar with her

**Question Three:** What is the the Family Whānau Support Worker's role in developing and keeping family/whānau and staff relationships positive?

- Working out a way to build relationships with the children and families (not the close contact the staff have)
- The key is this relationship so parents will feel comfortable talking with the whānau support worker
- IT IS NOT THE ROLE OF THE WHĀNAU WORKER. This is the role of the teaching team. [emphasis in original]
- Link between families and teaching team – can offer alternative perspectives
- Support for all, and a person where all concerns about children can be discussed openly

**Question Four:** Thinking about your role with our nursery families, what is the teacher's role in developing and keeping these relationships positive

- Maintaining positive relationships – the children are in the teachers' care!
- Finding ways to connect with parents
- Being yourself so parents know 'who you are'
- Keeping parents informed – conversations built around the child, profiles etc
- Working out ways to ensure that everyone is happy

By 2007, when a new Family Whānau Support Worker had been appointed, this lack of clarity and role confusion was no longer an issue for the *Citizens* staff or the new appointee. *Citizens'* management and teaching staff decided to use the appointment of the new Family Whānau Support Worker in 2007 as an opportunity to review the formal job description. This ensured a clarity and shared vision, which included meeting both the objectives of the *Methodist Connect's* community development programme, and providing an advice and support service for the parents and Whānau of *Citizens Nursery and Preschool*. In addition, to avoid any future role confusion or misunderstanding from the early childhood staff and management, the new appointee spent time establishing her role in the position with the teachers from the beginning. She was able to be very clear with the teachers that her position was a complementary one to theirs and that working together would be the best for the families and their children. A conversation between the Supervisor, the Research Associate and the Family Whānau Support Worker described this process in this way and acknowledged the complementary roles that each play in the centre:



**Research Associate:** What is the difference that in fact you don't see that you're in conflict with the teachers?



**Family Whānau Support:** I don't put myself **up there** [emphasis original]. I was having a talk to one of the staff members when I first came and we talked about what my role was and how I was going to do it and how I'd like to see us working together. I did that right at the start....I've never said: "Oh, I'm better than [the teachers]. I'm one step above you or one step behind you or one step in front of you. I've always made it a flat playing field. Always come into it trying to be equal and trying to be open. So I guess that's why there's not: "We don't need a social worker" or, "She's taking on my job". Most of them see it as a real asset to their own practice and they're really good about it....They are really fantastic.



**Supervisor:** I think it's about the relationships you've built.





**Family Whānau Support:** And that's why it's really important for them to know what my role is.



**Supervisor:** I think that was a thing of the past, wasn't it? ... That a lot of teachers were put in that role of social worker....There was that struggle between the – because that's obviously the need that was out there. So you were chewing both roles. Well, now they can say: "Oh gosh, I don't need to deal with that".



**Family Whānau Support:** [Rather now the teachers can say] Who do I need to go to help this family? You know. Is it this service down the road? Ah, it's Family Whānau Support, she knows. ... [In comparison to what the teachers do] I can't teach [the children] 'cause that's not my skill and I guess that's another thing, they know that I don't try to teach and they know that I – when I go in there - because at the start I think they thought I was going in there trying to – watching how they were doing things and I'm going: "I have no idea what it is you're doing with the families and I don't care. What I care about is our relationships, family, staff and children, you...and we start with the children.... I'm not over here spying and I actually don't know what you guys do but obviously you do it really well".... I wouldn't have a clue what that [teacher]'s doing over there with those kids and the reasoning behind it....But I don't try to do what they do because I think it's a respect thing and they don't try to do what – well mostly they don't try to do what I do.

Seeing the professions as complementary and working together for the families was always the vision for this innovation of *Citizens*, but an initial lack of clarity of vision, purpose and job description acted as a barrier to this happening for both the teaching staff and the Family Whānau Support Worker. At the start, there had been some friction as the teachers feared that the Family Whānau Support Worker might take some of the valuable time with parents away from them, and losing a point of contact in the child's day as the relationships developed between the Family Whānau Support Worker and parents. These fears were unfounded. Likewise, keeping the teaching and learning roles separated from the Family Whānau

Support Worker tasks enabled the physical presence of the Family Whānau Support Worker not to be confused with that of the teaching staff.

#### **4.4 Results: Supporting parents and children – Family Whānau Support Worker**

Three key themes arose from our research data, reflections, and analysis of the role of the Family Whānau Support Worker for supporting families at *Citizens*. We have called these themes: *Being there and being seen*; *Making time to talk*; and *Building bridges*. Together these three themes demonstrate both the philosophies and the practices that provided successful practice examples for the work of a Family Whānau Support Worker in the early childhood setting.

##### **4.4.1 Being there and being seen**

For parents to feel comfortable in talking with, or seeking out, the Family Whānau Support Worker, the parents needed to know who this person is, have a sense of their position within the early childhood centre, and begin to develop a relationship which enables them to begin to ‘trust’ and ‘share’. Several different activities were established to support this emerging relationship so that the Family Whānau Support Worker was ‘being there and being seen’ both at key moments, and more generally in the programme.

###### *4.4.1.1 At enrolment and transition into the Nursery times*

The Family Whānau Support Worker was involved in meeting the parent/s and child at time of enrolment and the following transition into the Nursery.

By letting the Family Whānau Support Worker know a child and mother would be settling she was able to be around in order to meet the family. This led to [the Mother] joining her for a coffee while her child spent time with the teachers allowing them to fill out necessary forms and chat. (*Citizens* Teacher reflection, 2007)

###### *4.4.1.2 At drop off and pick up times*

Varying her/his hours of employment the Family Whānau Support Worker was able to be around at the key times when parents were departing or collecting their children. While these were very rushed times, and not ones for long conversations, the aim of being available at these times was to build a level of familiarity both with

and for the parents. They can follow up with the Family Whānau Support Worker at other times through the day. This proved to work effectively.

A Family Whānau Support Worker, in 2005, noted one month into her new position:



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** I began to think about the fact that I was not really getting to meet any of the parents so decided to change my hours in the short term to be there in the mornings when the [centre] opened and greet parents as they came in. This was okay but I found that the parents really didn't have the time in the mornings to be bothered chatting to me as they were rushing in and settling their child before heading off to work. I then tried being there at the end of the day and in some ways found that to be the same but I did get to meet a few more of the parents. (Reflection, notes November 2005)

However, physically being there led to the parents knowing and relating to the Family Whānau Support Worker, and within a short period of time parents were requesting opportunities to talk outside of the busy drop off and pick up times:



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** We are thinking about changing my hours especially when I am available to parents. Now I feel that most parents know me, which has justified the plan to spend time in the nursery and preschool. ...Most people I can name as they come through the nursery and preschool. The connections are being recognized outside of *Citizens*, with people saying "Hi". This is a direct result of spending time on the floor. They have become familiar with my face. They will stop me to have a natter. (Reflection notes March, 2006).

Thus, being available is as important as being seen to be there. Making both the time and having a place to connect with parents – not inside the early childhood programme itself was important.

#### 4.4.2 Making time to talk

Making the time to talk is not as easy as it may sound. Working and busy parents may not have the time to stop during the centre hours or at pick-up or drop-off the

child/ren times. Thus different time schedules and activities were trialed so that there was a wide a range of opportunities, planned and informal, for parents to access the Family Whānau Support Worker.

#### 4.4.2.1 *Catching up – A planned encounter*

Within the first eight weeks that a family is enrolled with a child/children at *Citizens* the Family Whānau Support Worker has a ‘catch-up’ meeting with each family. These meetings provide opportunities to explain the Family Whānau Support Worker role individually to each family, while attempting to ascertain how families view the early childhood service and whether they have any concerns. Rather than use a model of family assessment, these meetings are presented as an opportunity for *Citizens* to assess their own service delivery to the family, and to provide a chance for the parent/s and the Family Whānau Support Worker to ‘have a chat’. The Family Whānau Support Worker described them as follows:



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** Well, I just called it a ‘catch-up’... I think I’ve talked about the reaction that one parent when I said to her: “Oh, you’re coming for your assessment tomorrow”. And she was: “Is it an assessment?” And she got all upset and I thought – and so I said: “Oh no, I don’t actually mean that”, I said: “That’s just a - a word”. I said: “It’s actually just a catch-up and see how things are going for you with your transition into the nursery”. “Oh, I thought that’s all it was”. I said: “Well, that seriously is all it is about”. And I’ve gone to other families where they’re really worried about what it is I’m going to say to them and when they realize that you’re just there to – to make sure everything’s okay. “That we’re giving you [the family] what you want out of the centre and if we’re not, what is it?” So they’re much more relaxed about my role now that the words have dropped. We don’t use those [assessment] words and we just use family- friendly words.



**Research Associate:** Has the intent behind it changed too however because that notion of an assessment versus a catch up to see how things are going are really different?



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** Well, when I first came here I said to [Management]: “What assessment tool do you want me to use?” And she said: “Just find what best fits you”. So I went and researched assessment

tools and I thought: “They’re not going to like me coming and asking all these questions and I don’t [need to know all these things]. What do I need to know about these families? I need to know - Is everything all right for them at the centre? Is everything all right for their children at the centre? Are we doing things as they like it and if not why not? And what would they like us to change?” And I figured that was the only four things we needed to know and if they wanted us to know something then that was an opportunity for them to tell us. It may be something personal. And then from those interviews I’ve developed good relationships with a lot of families that know to come straight to me.

Once the parents were clear of the Family Whānau Support role, and had begun a conversation with her, it made it easier for the informal follow-ups and ‘catch-ups’. One form of this informal contact we have called ‘car-park’ talk and the Family Whānau Support Worker describes the success of these:



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** This evolved from my forming relationships with families. Often I would be walking into or out of the centre and a parent would be either coming or going. I would say a cheery: “How are you?” and they would often stop for a chat. These chats usually lead to concerns or issues that they may be having. They feel sometimes that these are insignificant and don’t want to take up the teachers valuable time. They think my role is about chatting, as that is what they see me do. Often good information comes from these chats, which I can pass on. Parents can become more open and they come to realise that there is no issue too large or too small and that I will always find time to listen to them. (Reflections, 2007).

While the car park and the early childhood centres themselves provide locations for talking, there are many times when a more private space is required, and/or a place to access resources or forms for parents is required. The Whānau Room, at *Citizens*, is this place.

#### 4.4.2.2 *Whānau Room at Citizens*

An aspect of introducing the Family Whānau Support Worker role to *Citizens* was how to accommodate it within the early childhood complex. Originally, there was a space in the Preschool playground, where a garden shed had been fitted out as an office and called the Family Whānau room. There were some challenges in using the space as children would know if adults were in the room. These tensions were explored in the reflections of a Family Whānau Support Worker in 2006:



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** Currently, I am based in an office within the outdoor area of the Preschool which makes it a bit of a 'fish bowl' given that both children and adults can see me. At times the children will come in and want to stay, and this includes playing with the computer. Most know that they are not to come into the office but being a place of interest it is not uncommon for someone to want to visit. At times this has meant that the door has to be locked. (Research notes, March 2006)

There were also difficulties in making the space available for families when the Family Whānau Support Worker was also using it as an office. Using the space for both an office and a parent room posed difficulties for enabling the room to be used by parents without a *Citizens* staff member present, and lacked a family-friendly appearance. Later in 2006 a change was made - the Family Whānau Support Worker was given office space elsewhere on site. The room was decorated in 2007 to give an inviting family feel. The move had two advantages: first, it freed up the room for parents to access with or without the Family Whānau Support Worker, and second, it relocated the Family Whānau Support Worker alongside other management and supervisory staff of *Citizens* which increased communication and the sense of a complementary approach to working with families.





**Figure 7: Whānau Room, Citizens Preschool and Nursery**

The design and establishment of a room for families has been an ongoing process throughout our research. It has involved getting the room decorated while sourcing resources that will be of value to parents, teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker. Slowly families are beginning to utilise the room both for spending time with their children and for making use of the available technology. It has become a resources room for all the *Citizens* community.

#### *4.4.2.3 Family Whānau Support Worker led activities*

Building networks and connections between the parents was a key aspect of the Family Whānau Support Worker. This involved planning and carrying out activities to build relationships between the parents and strengthen the *Citizens* community. To establish what parents themselves were interested in, or would be relevant for them, the Family Whānau Support Worker began by emailing parents and asking them for suggestions for parent groups. This was found not to be the best way of finding out what parents wanted, as only one response was received. The second approach was

made by a jointly developed questionnaire, with the teachers in the *Nursery* to gather feedback about whether parents were generally interested in participating in centre life, and to build deeper relationships between parents, children and the centre.

The questionnaires were distributed to all families enrolled at *Citizen's Preschool and Nursery*. Seventeen were returned. Out of these 100% responded that they were interested in evenings and activities for themselves and their children. The responses ranged from suggesting 'Fish and Chip evenings' to specific parent education nights. Interestingly, 41% of the respondents were interested in the having access to a computer, a few said they would need help to use the ICT. (See Appendix F for the questions).

Coffee mornings were established with the aim of providing a time where the Family Whānau Support Worker could meet with families informally, and strengthen the relationships, including with extended family. Another aim was for parents to be able to socialise with each other in an informal manner, hopefully creating relationships within the centre. These mornings were held in the Whānau room. Connecting parents and families with each other contributes to building and strengthening the Citizens' community and building links and bridges between individuals and organizations.

#### **4.4.3 Building bridges**

The third theme of our investigations emphasises the importance of the links that the Family Whānau Support Worker role plays in connecting people with other people, places, information and resources. This function is generally unlike the teaching roles of the staff at the centre – the Family Whānau Support Worker has the time and opportunity to seek and find resources, attend community meetings, accompany parents to agencies to help with entitlements and form filling and the numerous other tasks and opportunities that builds bridges between the families and the early childhood centre with the rest of the community.

##### *4.4.3.1 Resources, community liaison and outreach*

The Family Whānau Support Workers have been involved in making contact with local community organisations that have been useful both for immediate parent



support, and also for long-term community development for *Methodist Connect*. This aspect involves networking in the community and identifying which organisations might be able to provide services for families. See Table 9 for some of the contacts and agencies established by the Family Whānau Support Workers.

**Table 9:  
Agencies and Community Groups contacted by the  
Family Whānau Support Workers 2005-2007**

<b>Agencies</b>	<b>Community Liaison</b>
Strengthening Families	Literacy workers, Approach
Family Start	Local schools – Principals and New entrant teachers
CYF Services	Social Workers in Schools
Well Child Network	Dunedin Hospital
Plunket	Supergrans
Public Health Nurse	Pregnancy Help
Dunedin	Lactose Services
Mental Health Services	Breastfeeding counselor
Catholic Social Services	Women’s’ Refuge
Arai Te Uru Whare Hauora	Local early childhood services
Barnardos	Ministry of Education/Team Up

*4.4.3.2 Teacher led initiations*

For example: a teacher approached the Family Whānau Support Worker to say that a parent had approached her with a request for information regarding their child, the teacher indicated that the Family Whānau Support Worker would most likely be able to help her with this. The Family Whānau Support Worker then sourced the information and when the parent contacted her later in the day she had the information at her fingertips. This example shows the value of having a person specifically for these requests with the knowledge of where to access such

information and supplying parents with requested information faster. She relieved the teachers from having to find the time in their already busy days to access this information. See Table 10 for an example of the activities of a Family Whānau Support Worker.

**Table 10:  
Activities for a Family Whānau Support Worker (sample of tasks)**

	April 07	May 07	June 07	July 07	Aug 07	Sept 07	Oct 07	Nov 07	Dec 07	Jan 08
Accounts	3	6	2	6	5	5	4	4	5	
Transitions					2	1	1	1		3
Catch-ups		1	3	1	2	4	3	1	3	2
Parent meetings					4	1		94 (party) 7 (BBQ)	2	2
Assistance					8	2	1		29	3
Email Letters	3	6	10	8	9	7	Notices to all families	Notices to all families	Notices to all families	15
Information		2	5	8	8	6	12	27	13	18

Accounts = catching up with parents regarding their accounts  
 Transitions = helping parents when their children transition to preschool or nursery  
 Catch-ups = Talks to parents about how things are going for them  
 Parent meetings = this was to start a parent fundraising committee  
 Assistance = Help with subsidy forms or more complex assistance  
 Information = informal chats with parents which we call 'car park talk' as that is where it is most likely to happen, families became more relaxed with me after being here a few months

**4.4.3.3 Management team collaboration**

Another key aspect to building bridges has been the position of the Family Whānau Support Worker within the wider management structures of *Citizens*. A success factor has been positioning the role within a collaborative management structure within the organisation. In this way, the Family Whānau Support Worker can be kept in touch with any assistance and guidance needed, and to have a supportive environment to work within – breaking down professional isolation.

Weekly meetings provide a forum for the Manager responsible for *Citizens*, the centre supervisor, Family Whānau Support Worker, and senior teacher from the *Nursery* to discuss what has been happening at the centre for the children, families, teachers and support staff. These meetings are designed as a time of sharing and information gathering in a supportive environment and acted upon in a timely manner. Initially, when this forum was set up, the discussion was very much about policies to guide practices and for decision-making about specific issues. This had limitations in that many decisions had to await a team meeting. Since 2006 more decisions are being made independently by staff as needed, in a timely manner.

This streamlining of decision-making has been facilitated by the Family Whānau Support Worker sharing an office with the centre supervisor which is also used by the senior teacher during her office hours. Interactions between the teaching staff and the Family Whānau Support Worker are more frequent (both informally and formally), creating more confidence in carrying out solutions, as they are required. In addition to these weekly update meetings the Family Whānau Support Worker and centre supervisor have individual weekly meetings with the Manager. The Family Whānau Support Worker also has regular social work supervision with someone outside of *Citizens*.

Interestingly, both styles of management and leadership as well as perceptions of the role of the Family Whānau Support Worker have played a large part in the effectiveness of the role within *Citizens*. The following example demonstrates this point:

**An example of the impact of perceptions of the role and responsibilities by different Family Whānau Support Workers within management structures:**

Part of our role as a team in supporting families is making sure parental payment of child attendance fees works smoothly and working positively with families, especially where there is a risk of getting behind in payments. The first part of this is the accounts administrator based at *Methodist Connect* who has a working knowledge and understanding of how management and teachers work together with

families. Initially there was a challenge for the Family Whānau Support Worker in working through her role when supporting families on this issue. She did not want to be seen as a debt collector.



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** When you have put in the hard work to establish relationships with families where they hopefully feel safe to come and talk to you about things that concern them or for support, and then you have to turn around and then deal with a situation where you are then searching them out to offer them support due to not being able to pay their account to your place of work. How can you offer support when your underlying aim is for them to pay the account that is overdue or growing? Sometimes this type of support affects the relationship that you are establishing with these families. This is noticed when they begin to dodge you in the centre with the knowledge that if the Whānau worker approaches you she will eventually mention the fees. They may see this as the offer of support - only so I can pay my account. (Reflection, 2006)

This procedure was modified. The focus of the discussion was broadened to address support for families to enable the child/ren to continue to attend:



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** I believe that this is not a role of debt collecting; it is about supporting families to access any available help and to take the responsibility away from the teaching staff. I also believe that this often enables me to form stronger relationships as I am seen to be helpful. This ensures that teaching staff do not compromise their relationships with the families, which I see as the most important relationship at *Citizens*. (Reflections, August 2007)

It would be difficult to see how a centre could be providing support to families by allowing them to accumulate debt to the centre. Initially, due to a lack of policy at *Citizens* it was possible for families to incur debt. The first task was to develop a policy that would inform management when a family was getting behind in their payments and indicate appropriate forms of support to correct the situation. Unlike other policies it was important that the organisation and administration supported it. The aim was to reduce the stress at home when a large debt developed that they would be unlikely to be able to pay back. Currently, families are now advised much

sooner, and supported to problem solve managing the fees, thus preventing the debt from becoming overwhelming.

The rationale behind being able to offer assistance to families comes from wanting the best for the families and children that attend *Citizens*. For families to be excluded from attending just because they cannot afford to pay the fees does not seem supportive. Instead, working to ensure that the children and families can continue to attend the centre is the objective. This can involve linking parents with outside agencies to help make this a reality, for example, *Work and Income Support*. The Family Whānau Support Worker also works with families to help them manage their payments more effectively. One option is to help them find alternative cheaper or free early childhood education if necessary. For example:



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** I worked with a Mother from the Nursery re her entitlement to a subsidy, she had not been receiving any as she did not think that she was entitled to it. We went through the threshold of incomes and discovered that she did qualify; she was really pleased and has since attended to this. I did offer to go along with her if she felt that it would be helpful but she felt that she was capable of doing it on her own. (Conversation, 2008).

A Family Whānau Support Worker described how she goes about approaching and dealing with parents who have got behind in their fees:



**Family Whānau Support Worker:** I usually always approach the parent or parents and ask if I can have a word. I don't alarm them by asking them to go to another room, but do draw them aside for a moment to say that the office was concerned and could we talk. It is at this point I offer another room, either at the house or the Whānau room. If I have the account we talk about it and how we can work together to get it sorted. Options given are:

1. Offer to assist with subsidy forms in order to ascertain if they are getting their full entitlements.
2. Explain that they could put an automatic payment in place to cover the arrears.
3. Ask if there is any other ways we can help with this.

I have found that the parents are pleased to get this off their chests as it is often a burden that they are embarrassed about and they don't know what to do. I also mention that I understand what they are going through and tell them that this issue is quite common....I have helped other parents to get their payments sorted successfully. Often this is a relief for the parent to hear. I also tell them that I am the only person at the centre who knows about this as the office administrator talks directly to me when asking me for help. This is also a relief as it takes away the embarrassment that they may feel. Once they indicate how they want things to go we decide who will do what and agree to catch up in a few days to review what each of us agreed to do. I have found this approach to be an effective way to support parents and help them maintain a sense of self worth. Through working through these problems I have formed some really strong relationships. This has had a flow on effect in at least two occasions where the parent has approached me to help with other issues.

Overall, *Being there and being seen; Making time to talk: and Building bridges*, have all been dependent on developing strong trusting relationships, first, with the teaching team, the *Citizens* management and THEN with the families. To support these relationships and the work that is involved in being a successful Family Whānau Support Worker the research also identified key aspects of this position from a management perspective.

#### **4.5 Management perspectives on the successful employment of a Family Whānau Support Worker**

The following table summarises the insights gained through our research as to key guidelines for successful border crossing: that is, for the introduction of a Family Whānau Support Worker into an early childhood education and care centre.

**Table 11:  
Conclusions re a successful inclusion of a  
Family Whānau Support Worker in an early childhood centre**

<b><i>Appointment Processes</i></b>
Think about your community and what sort of person will fit with the centre personalities, building and outside services. Who do you want to represent your organisation out there in the big world? Wave the banner?
At the interview time, take the time to show the person through your facilities and get the staff's opinion (then they feel as though have contributed to the process and have been a part of it).
Regular one-on-one meetings with her manager

<b><i>Job Description</i></b>
Prepare a clear job description that is up-dated annually with discussion from both parties (the Family Whānau Support Worker and the ECE Management)
<b><i>Induction Processes</i></b>
In the induction process after appointment introduce person to all people in your service.
Begin with ten minute interviews with each staff member to discuss the Family Whānau Support Worker job specification and how they would be working to support teachers in their role too thereby establishing trust and establishing how they would work together.
<b><i>Underway in the ECE programme</i></b>
Include the Family Whānau Support Worker in staff meetings except those where there is direct planning of the ECE curriculum.
Include the Family Whānau Support Worker in all centre activities – BBQ teas, parent evenings, Christmas party, family celebrations, grandparents day etc.
Include the Family Whānau Support Worker in all your centre brochures and information about your centre.
Set times to revisit and clarify points of difference and similarities that are in the teacher’s job specs and that of the Family Whānau Support Worker.
<b><i>Systems of Management and Accountability</i></b>
Establish clear lines of reporting from the beginning with the Family Whānau Support Worker.
Make all communication transparent both with their manager and with the supervisor, head teacher. A trusting collaborative partnership needs to be supported to develop.
Report regularly –monthly reports and weekly meetings with the manager and with the group staff meeting.
<b><i>Break down isolation</i></b>
Ensure that the Family Whānau Support Worker is physically close to management, and/or teaching staff to enable regular communication – both formal and informal. This may necessitate shift times being similar as well as physical location being shared.
<b><i>With Parents</i></b>
Identification – use a name badge so parents, relievers, other services knew who the Family Whānau Support Worker is.
Include the Family Whānau Support Worker with each child enrolment. It is important that the Family Whānau Support Worker is a visible part of the process and is there to support the parent from the start. For

example, form filling can be daunting for some people.

Make the Family Whānau Support Worker's environment welcoming, safe and an area where parents can approach her without interruption and with confidentiality.

**Above all celebrate the successes**

## 4.6 Summary

What counts as support for families from a childcare centre that actively works with parents and children?

Our research question led us to investigate the role, responsibilities and the effectiveness of the position of the Family Whānau Support Worker. As we traced the development of the position we were able to identify key management policies and practices, differences in leadership styles, and perceptions of the role of the Family Whānau Support Worker, which worked to either assist or constrain the ability of the *Citizens Nursery* team to support families. Working collaboratively has enabled teachers to engage in their teaching roles and the Family Whānau Support Worker to engage in the social work roles, which together have enabled the team to meet the wider needs of the families who attend *Citizens*. To begin with there were tensions surrounding the introduction of the position, as teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker were equally unclear as to the areas of responsibility that each took in this newly created collaboration. However, as the roles and responsibilities were clarified, trusting relationships established (and re-established with each new person in the position), and structural and procedural supports for the Family Whānau Support Worker put in place, then the work of supporting families also became successful. Bringing about a shift in seeing support given by a Family Whānau Support Worker as more than just for times of crisis has been a key here also, and mirrors the move away from a dominant traditional social work discourse of clients and case-work to a perspective of 'healthy families' who just need a 'hand' every now and then.



# Chapter Five

## Investigation Two:

### Parent Support And The Early Childhood Teachers

#### 5.1 Introduction: Existing support for parents at *Citizens Nursery*

To begin our *Centre of Innovation* investigations into “What counts as support for families for a childcare centre?” we began with meetings to establish what a *Centre of Innovation* is and does, to develop the research plans and methods, and to build capability in the research team.

The first phase of the research involved examining teachers’ current practices and beliefs about what could be called ‘support’ for families and children. The teachers provided information about what their role in supporting families was, and what they perceived the role of the Family Whānau Support Worker to be. We explored how support currently worked for teachers, for children and for parents. Through this process there was a shift in focus from the Family Whānau Support Worker as the key to family support at *Citizens* to examining the role that all of the teachers, management and other groups in *Methodist Mission* played in supporting children and their families. This changed emphasis and removed some of the anxiety that the Family Whānau Support Worker had experienced to this point about having the research ‘spot light’ firmly focused on her and her role. The process also began to build a sense of being a research team.

The information that emerged from the conversations within the research team came to be seen as ‘base-line data’. In addition, the teachers documented the story of past procedures and practices when families first came to the *Nursery* prior to the appointment of a Family Whānau Support Worker; what happened when a person started in this role; what changed, (both positive and negative), and current issues. This research process was useful in providing a vehicle for the teachers to see that they had some common experiences that they could share and document as a professional group, and to begin their ongoing reflections as to the roles of teachers, Family Whānau Support Worker, and the management in supporting families.

Over the three years of the *COI* research, the teachers went on from exploring their own perceptions of current every-day practice to identifying what parents and families perceived as support. The research team also trialed new ways of observing teaching practices and instigated new events and activities in the *Nursery* to further build a sense of community and connections for the families at *Citizens*.

The findings are grouped under three key themes:

- It's the little things that count;
- To know you better and for you to know me better; and
- You don't know if you don't ask.

## **5.2 Finding One: It's the little things that count**

The parents identified that it was the 'little things that count' in terms of practices for children and parents alike. For example, one parent summed up the **little things** that teachers do as the part of best practices which make a difference for families:

They've got that caring nature, very supportive.... Like you pick the kids up at the end of the day and they'll say: Would you like some milk in Rosie's bottle? You know, to get Rosie home, 'cause we live [a distance away and they] say something as simple as that which could make the journey home that much more quiet than having screaming kids that are tired at the end of the day. So those little things that, you know, they don't have to do, but they do. (Parent interview, 2006)

Our investigations concluded clearly that, while on occasions extraordinary support needed to be provided for families, the support which regularly 'made a difference' were the every-day things. They involve best quality teaching practices, and are sustainable in all early childhood settings. We share some examples here.

### **5.2.1 Knowing who is who in the environment**

One of the consequences of the recurring changes in teaching staff, and Family Whānau Support Worker appointees, was that some parents found it hard to keep track of staff changes in the *Nursery*. In the interviews, some parents said that they could not recall being introduced to teachers:

I found it hard to start with not knowing all the staff and if new staff started I didn't know who they were....Like once you're introduced to somebody you feel more at ease with asking questions or that sort of thing. (Parent Interviews, 2006, p. 38)

Families who had been introduced to teachers when first looking around the centre said they did not always remember names, roles or even faces. We considered that this could be due to high anxiety levels and an overload of information at this time. Parents suggested that teachers wear name badges as one way of ensuring that they could be identified until families became familiar with the staff. Now all of the teachers, and most relievers, have a name badge.

This example made me think of all the simple and small things that I take for granted – such as parents knowing my name. By reflecting on this example and my teaching practice, I now make sure to introduce myself to parents even if somebody has introduced us previously. (Teacher Reflection)

In addition, to assist learning the names of teachers, a chart was created that includes teachers' names and photos. The chart also includes photos of regular relieving staff and student teachers. At the beginning of each day a teacher would record on a white board, outside the front entrance, the names of teachers who would be opening and closing the session. By doing this families are able to see who is in the centre and when.

### **5.2.2 Knowing what a parent can expect from a teacher: Consistency in professional delivery**

Parents, in their interviews, described how they had experienced differences in both the amount and type of information they received from teachers – depending who was on any given shift. With these parent perspectives in mind and a desire to provide continuity for all our families, no matter who is working at any one time, the Senior Teacher developed questions to spur discussions with teachers about what they valued as important information to share with families and ways in which this could be implemented. The centre Supervisor and Senior Teacher also recorded their expectations for the type of information that teachers should be providing families on a day-to-day basis as a minimum standard. The draft standards were discussed at a staff meeting and staff came up with a group agreement about expectations for talking with parents and providing them with information about their child's day.

The following questions were used to engage teachers' discussion at a focus group interview:

**Table 12**  
**Questions for discussion with teachers**

- What are the important things that teachers should talk to all parents about when dropping off and picking up their children?
- How is children's learning being portrayed to parents?
- Are all parents and children being greeted by name?
- Do we continually introduce parents to teachers and other parents?
- Consistency is very important because if parents are receiving mixed messages and conflicting information they can begin to wonder and question: How trustworthy we are as teachers? How well do we actually know their child? Are we reliable?
- When parents tell teachers information what happens, how is this dealt with, how could it be dealt with more effectively and why is this so important?

The following standards were identified and agreed.

**Table 13**  
**Citizens team consistency start and end of day**

### **Morning routine**

- Greet all children and parents by their names.
- At least one teacher should be available for families at the beginning of the day.
- Enquire about how the child has been doing to enable you to find out any information that will help you to respond to the child for the day i.e. sleeps, bottles, food, general.
- Ask how parents have been doing.
- Stay with the child so parents can farewell their child and so that the parent knows that there is someone looking after their child. This is especially important if the child is settling or if the parent is anxious or unsure about leaving their child.
- If the child is upset when the parent leaves give the parent a call at work or at home to let them know that their child is fine once they are happy.

### **Afternoon routine**

- Greet all children and parents by name.
- Have at least one teacher available to speak to parents on arrival.
- Talk to the parents about children's sleeps, food and bottles.
- Always tell the parents at least one thing the children have done/learnt during the day.

Enquire about the parent's day – parents are important

Our next research step was to measure whether, from the parents' perspective and the teachers' practices at the end of session had become more consistent. This involved an informal interview with families about the type of information that they were given by teachers when picking up their child. Finally, we enquired if there was anything else that they wanted to know but were not being told. The parents' responses indicated that they **were** receiving similar information from all teachers, See Table 14 for selected responses.

**Table 14:**  
**Selected responses from parents on information received from teachers**

<p><b>Parent 1:</b> [They] tell us about what they have eaten, drunk and when they have slept. If anything else exciting happened today.</p>
<p><b>Parent 2:</b> Sleep times, what the child's eaten, how she's been during the day, what she has done etc.</p>
<p><b>Parent 3:</b> What child's eaten, slept and what he has been doing that day.</p>
<p><b>Parent 4:</b> Sleep times, what she has eaten and anything exciting.</p>

Overall, parents were happy with the type of information being shared with them at the end of the session.

The teacher-researchers also wanted to know if there was a different style of delivery that parents may prefer. Some families liked the verbal feedback given by teachers, whereas others preferred to be supplied with written accounts as well, thus ensuring accurate information from the centre even if they did not pick up their child. Because families said written information was important, individual children's notebooks have been developed for teachers to record the necessary information for parents to take home.

### **5.2.3 Transition time into the *Nursery***

Beginning at an early childhood centre can be a difficult time for families, despite most early childhood professionals' endeavours to make it otherwise. One action research cycle in 2006 closely investigated this transition time – from child, teacher, Family Whānau Support Worker and parent perspectives. We felt that this time, in particular, could be a key time to support families' well-being. As well, it was an important time to link them to the wider *Citizens* community for future well-being and inclusion. As indicated in Chapter One, community development through strengthened relationships was part of the *Methodist Church's* vision for South Dunedin.

One of the 'little things' that *Citizens* provides to assist parents' and children's transition is 'free time' to spend with their child before official attendance begins to

allow both the child and the parent/s to become familiar with the staff and environment of the *Nursery*. This ‘free time’ was identified by most of the parents as a key support for them:

**Table 15:  
Selected comments from parent interviews re. transition time**

<b>Parent 1:</b> Already knowing the staff was a big thing, being able to spend time and hang out at the centre. Made me more relaxed about leaving due to being comfortable with the staff.
<b>Parent 2:</b> Being able to visit and look around the centre, coming here with my child, getting used to the <i>Nursery</i> together. Huge. Being able to settle in made it easier to leave her alone.
<b>Parent 3:</b> We were told that we could come and spend time before starting. Teachers were very helpful and informative. They told me all I needed to know. Made it easier.
<b>Parent 4:</b> The staff. Knowing the staff were so nice and friendly. Aileen generally shies away from people but this time she didn't she obviously felt safe. Made me feel comfortable leaving her here.
<b>Parent 5:</b> There was never a problem, no matter what I wanted to do, how long I wanted to stay. [The teachers] always encouraged me to do whatever suited myself and [my child]. So I just really found that it was always open, there was never any hesitation in letting me come and do what – do what I want or – and bring [my child] in for as long as I needed. So I found that really reassuring for myself.

Interviewing the *Nursery* parents and asking them to reflect back on what they found helpful when settling their child into the nursery and how this affected their feelings during this time, highlighted the value parents placed on being able to spend unlimited time at the centre with their child to get to know the teachers and the environment.

Reassurance was a common theme emerging from these interviews and reassurance that all was well for their child is arguably a key factor in support for families.

**5.2.4 Reassurance through the use of daily visual images**

When our investigations showed how important ‘reassurance as support’ was for parents – reassurance that all was well for their child and reassurance of their own

parenting skills – both the teaching team and the Family Whānau Support Worker looked at ways to respond and enhance opportunities to boost and provide every-day forms of reassurance.

#### *5.2.4.1 Written feedback*

The research raised the teachers' awareness that some parents wanted written information to support the verbal conversations they have with teachers at the end of the day. Introducing notebooks was a positive initiative. Parents have given feedback that it has been very beneficial, particularly for the parent who does not collect the child at the end of the day. Notebooks enable both parents or parent and grandparents to be kept fully informed as to what is happening for their child while at the centre.

#### *5.2.4.2 Visual images for parents*

I began video recording because I thought it would be good to show the different things Rex had been involved in while she was away. It was also to show Rosemary (Rex's mother) that he was happy and to put her mind at ease if she had any worries. (Teacher transition story)

The slide shows using photos of the children over the day to share with the parent/s at the end of the day have been identified as an additional reassurance for parents that their child was fine at the centre. The use of these shows on a computer in the *Nursery* has been a welcomed addition to our communication with families. The use of digital video and cameras has become a valuable tool at the *nursery* to capture images of settled and engaged children. Images enhance our conversations with parents about how their child has been and enables parents to see for themselves what their children are doing/learning at the *Nursery*. They add weight to our reassurances to new parents who may be finding it hard to leave their child while they go to work.

An interesting consequence of the *Nursery's* daily slide show for the children and their families has been that parents spend longer in the *Nursery*, enabling them to see first-hand what their children have been learning during the day. Their longer stays, in turn, create more opportunities for conversations with families - about the child's day, happenings within the *Nursery*, and the child's life at home.



Since introducing digital video and photos as a way of informing parents about their child's learning and day, I have noticed that Dana (mother) and his sister, Zoë, are spending longer in the centre than previously so they can take the time to watch. Dana seeks teacher dialogue as clarification about what and how Zack is doing. Dana commented that it is a really cool idea. (Teacher observation)

Parents are happy to spend time with a teacher and their child to watch videos and browse through photos while teachers describe what was happening at the time. This strengthens the teaching team's relationships with the parents while giving us an informal form of dialogue in which to share our knowledge of their children. Parents began to share more stories with the teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker about their child at home, strengthening the home-centre link.

### **5.3 Finding Two: To know you better and for you to know me better**

Relationships are the key to all aspects of early childhood education. While early childhood teachers often discuss how they 'know' the families that they are working with, *Citizens* staff put our own '**knowing**' under scrutiny – from both the teachers and the parents' perspectives. We explored whether the families 'know' the staff. And how well the teachers 'knew' the families? Did they 'know' every family?

#### **5.3.1 Family collages**

As a way of gaining more in-depth information about the child and their family, teacher's increased reciprocity: they shared information about their lives outside the centre, including their own personal interests and families. Through sharing this information they hoped parents would respond and share more with the teaching team. The overall aim was to build on the feeling of community within the centre. Family collages were used as the vehicle to introduce the teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker to the families.



**Figure 8: The Family Collage**

The teacher-researchers began collecting photos and words that described things that were important to the teaching team and of likely interest to the *Nursery* families. The teachers decided to share things about themselves first, before asking the *Nursery* families to share more with us. The family collages showed the teachers as people with lives outside the centre. The feedback from parents was immediate:

Now that our family collages are on the wall, parents are taking an interest and spending time looking at them. We as staff have learnt more about each other as well, giving the team a morale boost. (Teacher Reflection, August 2006)

The teachers found that the content of their collages created conversations with families around shared interests and other people they knew who were recognised in the photos. For example, conversations about sport and rugby became ongoing with one teacher after a parent noticed this shared activity. Another teacher shared this example:

On talking to a parent about different things, we got onto the subject of “Lark in the Park.” (This was an event, which was coming up that weekend). I shared with the parent that I would be performing during the day, which led to a discussion about what I was doing. Through sharing information about myself – that I enjoy dancing and spent most of my childhood involved in dance, I found that the parent also shared with me memories about their time at dancing. The parent said she would pop along to the gardens to watch me perform, as they had no plans for that day. She also said she would bring her children down to watch too. As it turned out the weather was not that great. It was very cold and windy. The next week the parent apologised for not coming to watch but said she was thinking of me dancing in the rain! (Teacher reflection, 2006)

After seeing the teachers' collages some families expressed that they would like to make their own. A centre camera was made available to the parents for this process. As a result, parents have added photos and information in their child's profiles for teachers and children to share.

### **5.3.2 Relationship chart – teachers and Family Whānau Support Worker**

Throughout the research project we kept scrutinising our 'knowing the parents'. With ongoing staff changes, as well as new families joining the centre, we could not be assured that the team 'knew' every family adequately, or that the families 'knew' the centre team, including the Family Whānau Support Worker. The teaching team decided that at least one teacher, if not more, would have meaningful, sustained conversations on a regular basis with families. No family would be 'missed'.

To investigate this, the research team developed a chart for teachers to reflect on their own relationships with existing families. The chart asked teachers to name as many members of the family, for each child, as they could. They were to add a reflection on how confident they would be in discussing centre and wider issues. They noted their views on approaching or being approached by family members.

The teachers found identifying names straightforward. Overall, they knew between 80-90 per cent of names and faces. However, some did struggle naming some parents, siblings and/or extended family members, which demonstrated that there were families with whom the teachers had fewer connections. The gaps were often those parental partners who tended not to come into the nursery to either drop off or pick up their children, siblings and extended family. Some teachers had a greater knowledge of these than others.

All families had at least three teachers out of the five who identified themselves as being very confident when talking with parents about what was happening for their child in the *Nursery*. All teachers were happy to talk about how the children got through the routines of the day but there were often a couple of teachers who were not as confident in talking with some parents if there was a concern. It was also apparent that there was less confidence in talking with some parents about out of *Nursery* topics. In this case every family had one person or more

who felt confident about talking about other things in families' lives and most had two or more.

The teachers also considered what sort of relationship the Family Whānau Support Worker had been able to establish with centre families. We investigated whether the Family Whānau Support Worker would find it more difficult to establish relationships and that parents and carers would be less confident in approaching her. A teacher-researcher worked alongside the Family Whānau Support Worker to create her own chart that would enable her to evaluate her own relationships with parents from the *Preschool* and *Nursery*. The Family Whānau Support Worker knew the faces of all parents and found that she had said 'Hello' to all of them at some stage. Her chart showed that she had ongoing conversations with over half the parents. Approximately one-quarter of the parents had set a time to talk with her further.

### **5.3.3 Did our perceptions actually match what was happening?**

The next stage investigated whether there was a match between the teachers' perceptions and actual parent experiences of connections with a teacher. We started by asking: "Were all parents being greeted when they dropped their children off in the morning?" Knowing this was only one indicator of opportunities for connecting with parents. Together the research team devised an observation schedule that would differentiate the different types of conversations that teachers had with parents. Each day the observation schedule was given to a teacher on the 7.30 am shift to observe teacher interactions with parents. She ticked the appropriate categories and at the end of the week these interactions were summarised into a table. This teacher-researcher also checked with the other teachers as to what type of conversations they had through the morning.

Table 16 provides the baseline indication over the period of a week of the amount and types of greetings between staff and families. The last number relates to the number of families who were only greeted with a 'Hello' over the week.

**Table 16:  
Baseline findings**

<b>No. of Families</b>	<b>Hello</b>	<b>Sharing Information</b>	<b>Personal</b>	<b>Only Hello</b>
18	28	5	20	7

We recorded that while all families were greeted, and several engaged in conversations, some families did not receive the level of engagement that we were aiming for with all our parents. Our results were seen as insufficient interaction for maintaining meaningful parent/teacher relationship for support for children and families.

In response to these findings, action was taken: an extra adult was rostered from 8 –9 am to ensure that a staff member connected each morning with every parent and their child. The Family Whānau Support Worker took this position and the number of more sustained conversations with parents increased in the morning. This improvement is captured in Table 17 showing that the number of people greeted only with a 'hello' had been reduced and the other two categories, 'sharing information' and 'personal' increased.

**Table 17: Summary of findings – after intervention**

<b>No. of Families</b>	<b>Hello</b>	<b>Sharing Information</b>	<b>Personal</b>	<b>Only Hello</b>
20	10	12	34	1

Having the Family Whānau Support Worker available in the morning served a dual purpose: it increased the number of people available in the morning to greet families and provided an opportunity for the Family Whānau Support Worker to be introduced to families. On days when the Family Whānau Support Worker could not be in the nursery, the teachers noticed that the types of interactions with parents decreased. In summary, an increased ratio of children to teachers matters.

### 5.3.4 Shared events with the families

Over the three years of the *COI* research several events were held to connect families with other families, and to continue to build new and deepening relationships with new families and with the new staff members of the continually changing teaching team at the *Nursery*.

#### 5.3.4.1. Family celebrations

The idea of holding a celebration for families was decided upon by the *Citizens* team as a way of building on the relationships with *Citizens* families while enabling families to develop a stronger connection with the centre as a community. These celebrations were held once a year and involved both the *Nursery* and *Preschool*. The aim was for families to develop their own connection with the environment where their children spent their days, and to feel that they are part of the family environment of *Citizens*.

The evenings were rolling events from 3.30-6.30 pm so that parents could participate at the time that suited them. Entertainment and activities (bubble machine, story teller, face-painting, clay work) occurred over the time. Food and drinks were always available in both the *Preschool* and *Nursery*. The projector screen was set up in the *Preschool* so parents could watch an ongoing screen show of photos of the children. A teacher went around both centres with the video camera and digital camera capturing moments throughout the evening. The goal of events like the celebration was to build on our relationships with the families and to encourage family participation in the centre, and the first family celebration was a large step forward in meeting this goal.

Parents and grandparents' comments demonstrated the success of these evenings:

- What a wonderful environment for my grandchild.
- Really enjoyed the screen show of the pictures and appreciated seeing the pictures of our children.
- It was great to see people come to this event.
- Great food and it just kept coming.
- When is the next one?

Figure 9: Photographs from Family Celebration Evening





## **5.4 Finding Three: You don't know if you don't ask**

Alongside our inquiry of 'knowing' families, we began to discover other insights from genuinely wanting to know about parents' perceptions of their *Nursery* experiences. This led us to ask parents about a range of aspects of *Nursery* life. As we discussed child feedback with parents, relationships with staff, and the roles of the Family Whānau Support Worker we realised that having only seen things through 'teacher eyes' in the past had limited the teaching and management practices of *Citizens*. As parents noticed the changes around the centre in response to their comments, the parents became more involved and willing to both share their views AND share their time at the centre. This has emphasised the value of continually asking parents what they find useful, supportive, helpful, and for their perceptions of policies and practices. Their feedback helps us maintain the best possible practices and support for families.

In the final months of our *COI* research we gathered parents' comments on the information they received in a paper format from *Citizens*. This covered initial enquires, enrolments, transition to the *Preschool*, and other parenting support information. Actions were taken to respond to parents' feedback.

### **5.4.1 Information book**

An information book is given to all families when they visit the centre for the first time. They are able to take this home and read all about *Citizens* at their own leisure. After consultation with parents, the teaching staff, the supervisor and senior teacher began making the necessary changes to the type of information that prospective parents received when visiting *Citizens Preschool and Nursery*. As previously discussed, parents had expressed the importance of knowing who all the staff are and the roles that they play. Photos of teachers, permanent relievers and centre management were the first additions to this information book. On a first visit, parents can now take home photographic reminders of teachers' names and roles. The following quote from a parent demonstrated how hard it is to absorb all the information as a new parent:



Like everything's new and you're looking around and there's kids and you're just kind-of listening, but you're half-listening to what's going on.... The information didn't sink in. (Parent interviews, 2007)

Other parents made similar comments. The data highlighted to us the importance of developing a comprehensive information book about our early childhood service that parents can take away with them and revisit at home in their own time and space. This information needs to be regularly updated, incorporating any new staff members and their photos. As well, policies are revised regularly.

The next revision of information related to the transition period. We wanted to offer improved information so parents could make informed choices about how to settle their child, provide relevant information to support the teachers and learn more about how the teachers would support them and their child during this time of settling into the unfamiliar *Nursery*. This new set of information included the *Nursery's* settling in policy, information around transitions to the *Nursery*, information and guidelines from *Public Health South* as to health and attendance at an early childhood centre, and information about what parents need to supply and what is provided by the centre. A description of a typical day and detailed routines along with sleeping policies and rough menu plans were also added. Most of this information had been verbally covered when showing parents around the centre, but our investigations demonstrated that it is also important to reinforce this type of information in writing. Parents then feel greater control when beginning the process of entering an early childhood centre.

#### **5.4.2 The enrolment pack**

Next we examined the other types of information that we supply to parents over and above the information book. Originally, the enrolment pack only contained relevant information about the centre and family details in which to confirm enrolment and payment plans. Following our research investigations into transition into the *Nursery*, we identified the importance of including information within a pack about some of the feelings that parents may experience when settling their child into an early childhood centre. It also included suggestions for families about the valuable information to give to teachers to help make their child's separation easier. The "Off to a Good

Start” booklet published with the help of *Team Up* and the Ministry of Education was added.

Consent forms are now included for teachers seeking to collect images and videos of the children to add depth and meaning to learning portfolios, and foster shared conversations between home and centre. A questionnaire developed by the Family Whānau Support Worker is also given to every family as a way of discovering what extra curricula activities at the centre they may like to be involved in. The teaching team, Family Whānau Support Worker, *Citizens* management and wider *Methodist Connect* services want to work together to cater to their individual needs as required. Always, the aim is to develop a sense of community within the centre and for the families, and thereby strengthen the community of *South Dunedin*.

#### **5.4.3 Transition to preschool pack**

A flow-on from asking parents about their transition experiences into the *Nursery* was attention to the next transition that the families experience: to the *Preschool* when their child turns two years-old. The development of a pack that would help ease parents anxiety about their child moving into the Pre-school environment came from ongoing conversations with parents about having to make yet another change just when they had become familiar with the teachers and environment at the *Nursery*. Parents who had recently made this transition commented that they found this time to be scary due to their two year-olds looking very small compared to the other children at *Preschool*. Other fears identified included parents not being familiar with the staff or routines at the *Preschool*, the buildings and the larger group sizes of children.

To support the parents in this transition process we developed a pack that provides information around the similarities and differences between the *Preschool* and *Nursery*. It provides initial information about what to expect in the *Preschool* environment. Parents are also given a copy of the transition to *Preschool* policy so that they know the process for their child when beginning to move over to the *Preschool*. A typical day at the *Preschool* along with the *Preschool* sleeping policy is included to enable parents to see how their child’s day may change during and after the transition. Photos and names of the staff were also included. Table 18 shares parents comments on this new information:

**Table 18:**  
**Selected parents' comments on the transition to *Preschool* information pack**

<b>Parent 1:</b> It was good to know about the routines at <i>Preschool</i> .
<b>Parent 2:</b> It was really good to see the different structure of how they work things, differences in how they eat, sleep. It's just good to know things.
<b>Parent 3:</b> It was quite helpful.
<b>Parent 4:</b> Good to know sleeping and eating policies and good to know they do out of day-care activities. It's hard to know until you are over there to know if there is anything you would have found useful until you know what it's like, ask me once I'm at preschool.

The investigation revealed that, although they found the information in the transition pack useful, parents had advice to offer about the time when it would be more useful to receive it to aid in their child's and their transition:

We received the pack one and a half weeks before Nina turned two. We felt that this was too late, as you generally wanted to know about that sort of information earlier. Therefore, a month before when the child starts transitioning [is suggested]. (Parent Interview, 2007)

Receiving the pack a little earlier may have enabled us to put a few of the transition ideas into practice a little earlier on. (Parent Interview, 2007)

Several parents mentioned wanting a period of time to prepare. To receive information when a family wants it, also provides a level of reassurance and support.

## 5.5 Summary

Understanding what 'counts as support' has been a three-year journey for the research team. While being able to immediately see the work of the Family Whānau Support Worker as being 'all about support', examining the micro-system of the *Nursery* itself, within the teachers' own every-day practices, revealed key components of what 'counts as support'.

Our investigations demonstrated that support for families is about the many essential elements of best teaching practices for children and their families. Interestingly, the changing management and staff within *Citizens* over the three years

of this project had created a situation where some practices and understandings about working with families had been 'lost' (for example, 'the taken for granted' habit of wearing name badges) and were rediscovered through the careful examinations of teaching practices that the teachers themselves undertook as part of the *COI*. This emphasises the need for clear 'hand-over' processes and management of 'gaps' in leadership/management positions in all early childhood centres to ensure that best practices are not lost with key staff moving on.

While some families need extraordinary levels of support at different times in their lives, ALL families need regular support and reassurance in their choice and use of an early childhood centre in their parenting to maintain confidence, and in becoming part of a community outside of their immediate familial setting. This everyday support has been described in this chapter using three themes: *It's the little things that count*; *To know you better and for you to know me better*; and *You don't know if you don't ask*.

Taken together, these themes demonstrate the importance of meaningful and reciprocal relationships between all staff at an early childhood centre and their families. While early childhood professionals have always prioritised parents in their work with children, our investigations highlighted the importance of **reciprocity** in these relationships – ensuring that the parents' perceptions of their and their children's experiences at the centre are regularly gathered, that suggestions and requests are acted on in as timely a manner as possible, and that teachers share aspects of their lives with the parents.

We also became aware that there were two key factors which worked to strengthen the ease and comfort of teachers' interactions with parents: 1) teachers who had experience and knowledge, and 2) familiar staff being available. The teachers in the *Nursery* who were more experienced found interacting with parents easier. This enabled them to gain knowledge about the families, which then made it easier for both the families and the teachers to have further conversations and more meaningful interactions. In our reflections on these factors a focus on supporting new teachers to build relationships with parents, as well as with their children, should be an important part of all induction programmes for new staff. Ensuring that familiar

staff are available at family contact times also increased the likelihood of parents sharing information and conversation with the teachers. The *Nursery* staff ensured that relievers were placed in areas to assist with the programme, so the familiar teaching staff were available to parents and children on arrival and departure.

We have found that what counts as support is determined by the person receiving the support. This was highlighted in the interviews with parents when they identified that it was the small everyday things that the teachers did for families that was experienced as support. These occasions were valued by families as regular support, for example, being offered a bottle of milk to take with them on a long drive to make this a happier and more enjoyable journey for all those involved. Before gaining this insight the teachers carried on doing the small things without any awareness of how much the parents appreciated their efforts; therefore, for us it reinforced that *if you don't ask you'll never know*. To continue to offer our families and children the best service possible we have established a range of approaches to include families' ideas and perspectives on their children and their own needs. We will be continually evaluating "*what counts as support for families from a childcare centre that actively works with parents and children?*"

# Chapter Six

## So What Does It All Mean? The *Centre Of Innovation* Journey Ends

### 6.1 Introduction

This *COI* began with the research question - What difference does support make to children's learning and development in an early childhood education centre? – and finished with the question that forms the basis of this final report: What counts as support for families from a childcare centre that actively works with parents and children? Our journey as a *COI* has demonstrated the lived realities of both the early childhood sector in Aotearoa New Zealand at this time (i.e turn-over of staff, lack of qualified relieving staff, and a shortage of early childhood qualified managers), and the challenges of a three-year research endeavour, where the gaze can shift and change in the process of investigation. Our travels have traversed the practicalities of changing and losing travel companions, crossing borders of language and understanding, and mastering new skills along the way. As with every journey, the experience can highlight aspects of our travel companions that we were unfamiliar with at the outset of the trip, reinforce and strengthen bonds between companions, but also cause conflict and tensions, and lead to rearranged itineraries. As we have documented in this report our journey has provided with us insights and understandings around the introduction into and sustainability of a Family Whānau Support Worker in an early childhood centre, as well as acting as a reminder of good teaching practices and the role this plays in supporting parents and whānau.

### 6.2 Journey's end with a R.A.P<sup>4</sup> - the early childhood way

Our investigations have demonstrated that just adding another staff member, one in a social work role, is not by itself going to bring about increased support for families and enhanced learning environments for children. A key difference has been the combination of **relationships** and **attitudes** that the staff brought to their roles.

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<sup>4</sup> R- relationships, A- attitudes, P - provisions

**Relationships** with the parents required meaningful and clear communication. Just as teachers are expected to be “responsive, reciprocal, positive and encouraging” in their relationships with children, these are also central to establishing relationships with other family members. All good teaching practices promote such relationship building. Our investigations into how well the teaching team ‘knew’ the children’s parents demonstrated for us that building relationships that provided meaningful support for parents involved:

- reciprocity (“To know you better and for you to know me better”),
- appropriateness and timing, and
- mutual interest in supporting the best possible teaching practices for both the parents and child by asking for parental feedback (“You don’t know if you don’t ask”).

Building relationships between the Family Whānau Support Worker and families involved the teaching staff giving families peace of mind by reassuring them that the type of early childhood support families had in the past from the teaching staff would be the type of support they would get from the Family Whānau Support Worker. She would not be a stereotypical ‘social worker’.

When the teaching staff were comfortable with including the Family Whānau Support Worker in their team, the parents began to include the Family Whānau Support Worker in their everyday interactions in the *Nursery*. Once she became part of the team, moving into the early childhood strength-based approaches to working with families, relationships with parents were strengthened (‘Being there and being seen’). Interactions were not solely ‘problem-focused’, so opportunities for meaningful support were created (‘Making time to talk’) and embraced. Once links between individuals had been established, further networking and building of a *Citizens* community of parents could begin (‘Building bridges’). Wider community agencies and resources were increasingly utilised for the parents and the early childhood centre. Our findings here replicate those of Duncan, Bowden and Smith (2005, p. 94) in their ecological study of ECE centres and family resilience where they conclude:

The most important supportive factors for families within the EC microsystem ... came from process variables which involved the relationships and interactions between EC staff and family members (including children). Parents/whānau could gain relief and reassurance from informal, warm and responsive contacts with staff, and from knowing that their children were experiencing quality child care. The professionalism and training of EC staff was absolutely crucial. Professionalism here is interpreted as having a non-judgmental view of families and recognising and supporting family strengths rather than providing a top-down expert approach, or telling families what to do. Provided that families were able to trust and relate positively to the staff, and their cultural background was respected and responded to, informal talk could provide families with relief from isolation, more confidence in their parenting and enhanced social capital.

The **attitude** that teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker bring to their interactions with families was a key to whether parents considered an action or particular practice as supportive or not. At the beginning of this journey the tensions involved with new roles and responsibilities for the staff at *Citizens* with changing travel companions, and lack of clarity over goals and visions, restricted the amount of support that could be offered to families, over and above the learning environment for the children. Moving away from a stereotypical approach of social work into an inclusive model that built on the teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker working TOGETHER was a turning point for increasing confidence, positive attitudes, and reflective practices for supporting families.

Management, and management practices, also played a key role in support for parents. **Provisions** for parents and parent support needed to be timely, appropriate, reflective and responsive to individual parents, as well as the collective whānau who make up the community at *Citizens*. This was evidenced in a range of ways from the format of printed information that was made available to parents, to the creation of staffing rosters to enable 'known' staff to be on hand for parents and children when the families arrived each day. Styles of leadership and decision-making, also management practices, made a difference as to how situations could be responded to in a timely manner, and which roles different staff members played. The overall perspective of management and styles of leadership in any early childhood centre contribute to enhancing teaching and learning and relationships with parents (Rodd, 2006). In addition, supervision and support, at a management level,



for the Family Whānau Support Worker has been a key factor in the sustainability of the position.

### **6.3 Citizens Nursery as a community of practice**

Looking at the role that the teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker played in supporting families centred our gaze on the links between *Citizens Nursery* and the child in their family and home (Hamilton, Roach & Riley, 2003) – the ‘meso-system’ of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Enriching and expanding centre practices were both the immediate and long-term outcomes of our investigations. In relation to our innovation, the research demonstrated that parent support was not something to be passed onto the Family Whānau Support Worker but a shared responsibility for the whole of *Citizens* at all the levels of teaching, social support, administration and management.

We identified key factors in supporting parents in their parenting and parenting experiences. For example, the ‘little things that count’ were often about clarifying communication with parents, engaging with parents not only about their child but with them as parents and members of a family, and noticing and responding to the parent as they parted from and collected their child. Being ‘in tune’ with each parent and their child strengthened the relationships with the teachers which in turn enhanced the teaching and learning opportunities for the child, and provided reassurance for the parent. The teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker noticing key moments in a family’s life and responding with appropriate practices to enhance both the centre’s practice AND the home environment were important; for example, providing a bottle of milk for the child on the long car trip home.

Our earlier chapters have demonstrated that good teaching practices combined with the professional expertise of a Family Whānau Support Worker made a difference for many families, but most particularly for families where a wider range of support services were required. We understand from surveying and listening to parents that what counts as support is determined by the person receiving the support rather than the one providing it. We have borrowed the framework from Kei Tua o te Pae (Ministry of Education, 2004) of noticing, recognizing, responding and

revisiting. Teachers now look for ‘supportive moments’, moments that are opportunities to provide support.

Building a new community of practice has involved **crossing of borders** from early childhood centres as places of teaching, and social workers as only ‘problem-based’ with clients. Establishing meaningful relationships between parents and the staff at *Citizens* will continue to be an evolving process. Creating a reconceptualised community of practice at *Citizens Nursery* has been a major outcome of this *Centre of Innovation* journey. See Figure 10:

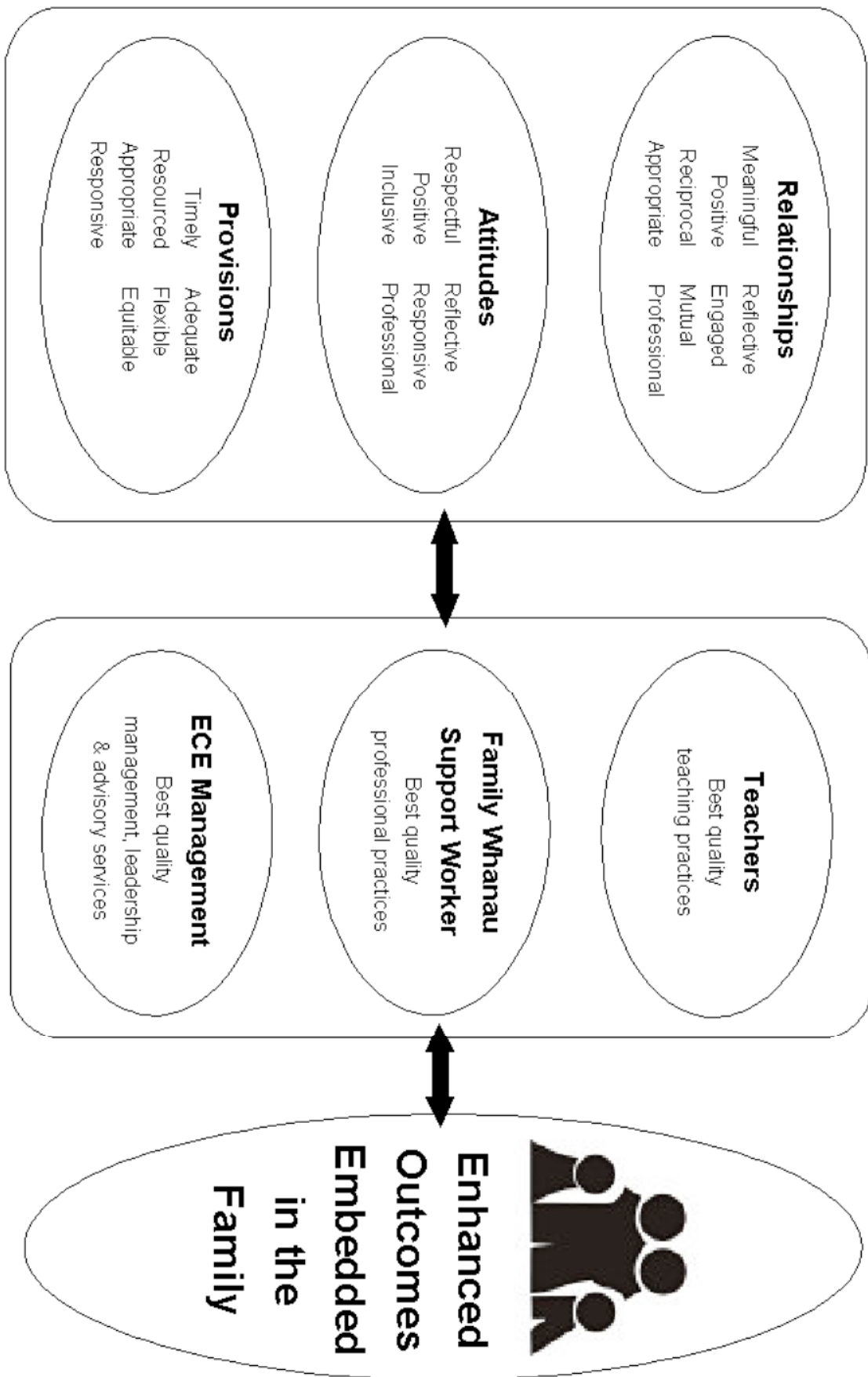


Figure 10: The R.A.P – Citizens Nursery and Preschool Community of Practice

As the diagram indicates, it is with these best practices, alongside crossing the borders of difference to create a shared language and understanding surrounding family support, that the teaching staff and the Family Whānau Support Worker together brought the best outcomes for children and their families. The COI research found that family support is not a function of either the Family Whānau Support Worker OR the early childhood teaching staff but both together, offering different and distinctive forms of support that come together for every family within the centre.

#### **6.4 Final reflections on being a *Centre of Innovation*: from a teacher-researcher's perspective**

The *COI* journey has had many bumps in the road for the team of teacher researchers at *Citizens*. We are pleased to say that we have reached our destination.

While it is difficult to establish that any learning is only due to being a *COI* we can see a number of influences that we attribute to our involvement as a *COI*. In addition to these influences we felt it was the time and resourcing that the *COI* opportunity provided that allowed the team to “discover themselves” in a way not possible before.

One of the decisions we made early on was to involve the teaching and Family Whānau Support Worker team as practitioner-researchers in the *COI* project. One of the reasons for this was the changing personnel, and leadership role changes that accompanied staff changes.

The process of engaging in action research, asking reflective questions, often led by the research associates, has become our ongoing way of doing things. Our teachers, having been through the experience of asking deeper questions about our practices and our ‘taken for granted’ understandings, have made this an ongoing practice at *Citizens*. It is easy to ask the superficial questions, but it is the deeper questions that lead to decisions where teachers changed or altered their practices in a meaningful way. An unexpected outcome of this process is that we now realise that it is okay if not everyone agrees. This means acknowledging that debate is important and that management will not make all the decisions. Taking responsibility means finding an optimal level of agreement between teachers about how things might be

done – creating our own ‘community of practice’. In the community of practice that has developed during our time as a *COI*, decisions are often revisited, people are supported to ‘have a go’ and return to the decisions to evaluate them and the actions that followed. We participate in ongoing self-review on a daily basis.

The benefit of participating in a *COI* is the way the action research process starts to validate a different way of working. It has made acceptable the practice of challenging each other, having discussions that can turn into debates and establishing a way forward without the necessity of having everyone agree with each decision. There is a sufficient sense of ownership to explore practices further. This builds confidence in the process, and confidence that, ‘yes, we as teachers can do things’ that we could not imagine ourselves doing at the beginning of the project. Particular examples are presenting, writing and using computers. The *COI* was important for providing time to talk as a team that would not have happened previously. This gives a feeling that *Citizens* has a shared vision, which is articulated by many. *COI* provided the platform for the development of the shared vision during the time when there was a number of changes in teachers and management. We are now more articulate, and have a better understanding of academic language and what research involves.

These changed approaches to working in the *Nursery* have also been supported in the *Preschool*. Partly through staff changes, where teachers who are in the *Preschool* come and work in the *Nursery* and vice versa, but it is also a matter of sharing ideas in principle where the *Preschool* team have to discuss and ask themselves if these ideas would be useful. For example, the *Nursery* teachers have used the idea of ‘family collage’ displays to introduce themselves to families. It is not important that the *Preschool* also use collages, but rather that they ask the questions about what it is that collages achieve and whether there is a means of achieving something similar in the *Preschool*. In this example, the idea is that teachers were working on how parents can start to get to know the teachers better.

Improved relationships are the cornerstone of family support. This is based on one of the principles of support we have developed in *COI* called “For you to know me better and me to know you”. It is the discussion of these types of ideas at the

level of principles that allows for ownership across a team. How the ideas are achieved in detail is not as important as an agreement about a principle that teachers support.

This 'working with ideas' rather than following 'rules or examples' has provided a lot more discussion about how to integrate the role of the Family Whānau Support Worker in the *Nursery* and *Preschool* relationships. For the team, the *Centre of Innovation* journey associated with research processes has enabled both teachers and social workers to work together with children and their families in a positive and non-threatening atmosphere to provide the necessary individual support personalised for each and every family. This involved the teachers and Family Whānau Support Worker getting to know each other. In doing so, we learnt ways to support families *together* rather than teachers seeing their role as passing on support responsibilities to the Family Whānau Support Worker.

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# Appendices

## **Appendix A: Teachers and research associate agreement**

### **COI-research agreement**

#### **Purpose**

Citizens Preschool and Nursery and the Children's Issues Centre are funded by the Ministry of Education to work collaboratively in order to develop action research projects that will investigate how support for families can make a difference to children's learning and development. This is funded from the Ministry's Centre of Innovation Project, which supports the Early Childhood Strategic Plan.

This agreement is to clarify the relationship between the Dunedin Methodist Mission, who hold a COI contract with the Ministry of Education, and more specifically the Citizens Preschool and Nursery personnel who are to undertake the research, and the Children's Issues Centre at the University of Otago who have a contract with the Ministry of Education to provide research support.

#### **Philosophy**

The centre and community is the principal focus of the research and all efforts will be taken to make sure the research process and outcomes contributes to the development of families, children and staff. If there is a conflict of interest the research will become secondary to other concerns, Families and practitioners participation in centre life will not be jeopardised by not choosing to participate in the research.

The COI project is a collaboration between the Citizens Preschool and Nursery and the Children's Issues Centre. That collaboration is reflected in the joint planning, conducting and disseminating of research. Teams of people will work together in an inclusive manner so that all who wish to participate can contribute to the research process.

### **Communication and Roles**

**Formal contract roles** are given to Michael Gaffney and Judith Duncan from CIC and Nicola Grundy, Shyami Fernando and Kylie Preedy from Citizens Preschool and Nursery.

When either team wishes to clarify information and procedures with the Ministry of Education they will contact Sophie Alcock in the first instance and if she is unavailable then Anne Meade or Patricia Nally.

### **Contacts and Leadership**

The **CIC team** will consist of 3 university researchers

The **COI team** will consist of:

- The Family Whānau Support Worker
- The Child Services Manager
- Senior Teacher (Nursery)
- Centre supervisor
- And one other Nursery Teacher.

These teams will be responsible for working together to oversee the co-ordination of the project. Communication between teams will be generally be between Michael Gaffney (from the CIC team) and Kylie Preedy and Shyami Fernando (from the Citizens team). Kylie as Senior Teacher will take responsibility for passing information on to the team of nursery teachers. The COI includes the nursery teachers and the Family Whānau Support Worker.

## **Conducting research**

A key feature of the COI is having teachers conduct the research supported by the CIC team and the COI team. The research process will be based on the two teams supporting the COI. Initial work will include reference to a research plan that describes question development, ethical procedures, methods of data collection to be used, data collection responsibilities, collation and analysis of data, dissemination options.

## **Meeting**

In general the two teams will meet at least once a month and teachers will meet for COI purposes as required.

## **Families**

The COI will take responsibility for liaison with families about COI research. At times they will bring together a group of parents and caregivers to consult with, not for data collection purposes (e.g. a focus group), but to consult on how to sensitively work with families as the COI is developed.

## **Publications and Presentations**

### **Drafting material**

In general before material about COI is sent to people, who are not on either team, members from both teams will have had an opportunity to review it and make comment before it is released.

### **Seeking approval for publication**

Ministry of Education – The contracts with the Ministry require that we seek approval for any formal presentations made to local and national forums, or writing of articles that will appear in publications. Presentations in the forms of notes and papers and

draft articles will be presented to Sophie Alcock of the Ministry at least a week prior to the presentations or submission deadline unless alternative arrangements are made. In order for this to happen all team members will negotiate and agree to timeframes that will allow for everybody to meet their writing responsibilities.

## **Collaborative writing and presenting publicly**

All teams will agree on the presentations and publications to be made from the project. Teams will nominate their own members who will be involved in collaborative writing and presentations. The Citizens COI team will take responsibility for providing opportunities for nursery teachers to be involved in these activities. The identified team members will then take responsibility for co-ordinating the development of the presentations and papers according to agree timeframes.

Authorship of written publications will be by a collective name rather than individual names. With individuals being acknowledged as endnotes or footnotes.

## **Review**

The agreement will be reviewed one year after all teams have agreed to the contents.

Review Date: Beginning of 2006

## **Appendix B: Readings provided for reflection for the research team**

### **2005 - Action Research in Infant and Toddler Settings**

- Hanna, P., Firth, J., Couch, J., & Janes, P. (2003). Family Daycare action research/self review with a focus on adult/child interactions. Paper presented at the *Eighth Early Childhood Convention*, Palmerston North, New Zealand.
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- Mitchell, L. (2003, 22-25 September). Children, Staff and Parents: Building respectful relationships in Australian and New Zealand early childhood education contexts. Keynote presentation to the *Eighth Early Childhood Convention*, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

### **2005 - Transition into ECE for infants and toddlers**

- Lee, D. (2000). Myths and realities? Some thoughts about settling infants into early childhood centres. *The First Years: New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, 2(1), 13-15.
- Dalli, C. (2000). Starting child care: What young children learn about relating to adults in the first weeks of starting child care. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 2(2), 1-13.
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### **2006 & 2007 - Theoretical understandings: Parents and Early Childhood Staff**

- Brown, E. G., Amwake, C., Speth, T., & Scott-Little, C. (2002). The continuity framework: A tool for building home, school, and community partnerships. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 4(2).
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- Hill, N. (2004). The One-Stop Family Shop. *Children Now* (March), 20-21.
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## Appendix C: Reflective questionnaire

Questions used to help think about transition and their role and then capture in the stories.

### TRANSITION

- A) When a child first begins at the Nursery what are the important things that YOU think about? And why?
- B) Once the child has been at the Nursery for a day or two what are the things that YOU think about, notice, do most and why?
  - i) Think about
  - ii) Notice
  - iii) Do most
- C) Once the child is “settled” what are the things that you think about, notice and do that are different from when they first started? And why?
  - i) Think about
  - ii) Notice
  - iii) Do most

How do you know what YOU are doing during this transition time works positively for?

- i) Children
- ii) Parents
- iii) Other staff in the team

### FAMILY WHĀNAU WORKER

- a) Identify what role/s the whānau worker plays in your settling of children in the Nursery.
- b) What role would you like the whānau worker to play if different from your comments above?
- c) What role would you like the Whānau worker to play for the Nursery team?

### RELATIONSHIPS

- a) Thinking about YOUR relationships with our Nursery families what is your role in developing and keeping these relationships positive?
- b) What is the family whānau worker’s role in developing and keeping family and staff relationships positive?

## **Appendix D: Reflective questions for transition stories**

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Reflective questions – 7 March 2006 - These questions have been taken from a New Zealand publication O'Connor and Diggins (2002) On Reflection: Reflection Practice for Early Childhood Educators, (see p. 52)

Describing an episode or event:

What was the flow of events?

What were the important elements of the event?

What preceded and followed the event?

Who was doing what and why?

Decision making:

What decisions were made?

What were the main ideas behind the decision? – The ones accepted and the ones rejected?

What were the possible actions that could have been taken?

What was/were the outcome/s of the decision?

What were the problems or benefits identified?

What were the points of conflict: Disagreement? Agreement?

Reflecting on my own involvement:

What did I do to contribute to this situation?

What was my role?

What ideas influenced my actions/decisions etc.

What did I think was best practice? Best for the child? And why?

What did I feel about what I did and why?

Outcomes:

Evaluating outcomes: what works, what doesn't and why?

What difference perspectives on the outcomes do we bring? – SW versus ED.

How does this work and when does it not etc....

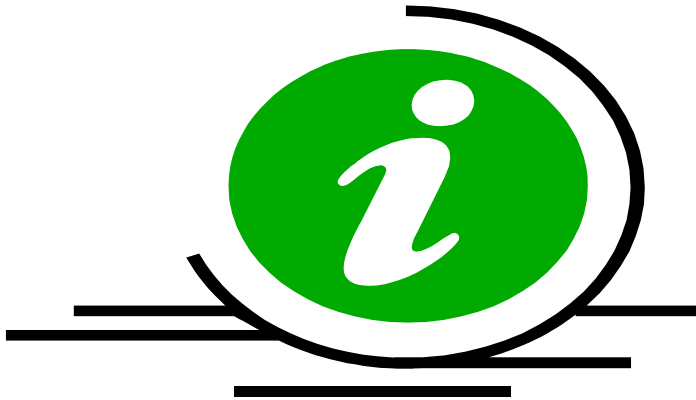
## Appendix E: The interview questions

***We are interviewing parents about how our centre can support families. As you know, early childhood centres are great places for children as well as places of support for families/whānau. Today I would like to know what you feel we do well for you and your family, and the things that we could be doing to support you and your child.***

1. Thinking back to when your family first began at the centre:
2. Why did you choose Citizens for your child? For your family? (if the family has had children at this centre before get them to expand on what they liked and didn't like rather than just because their other child/ren went there).
3. How was your initial settling in /beginning at Citizens for your child? For you and your family?
4. Was this time as you expected?
5. What went well? Didn't go so well?
6. Could things have happened differently?
7. How useful was the information you were given over this time? Were there things that you would have liked to have known more about? Had shared with you in a different way? Other things that would have been useful at this time?
8. (try to see if they talk about the specifics of being introduced to the centre otherwise use some prompts that follow:
  - a. Being shown around, information, forms and visits
  - b. Advice or information at this time
9. What is it like for you coming into the Nursery? How comfortable do you feel?
  - a. At drop off/pick up time?
  - b. Other times?
10. Do you have any examples of times where the staff have offered you and your child support or assistance?
11. How do you think that we could be more supportive or assist your family?
12. Do you think there are any particular areas we could assist with/in?
13. What would you like to know about at the end of your child's day?
14. How would you like us to be communicating regarding your needs for you and your child?

15. How do you find out about other things happening at the centre?
16. What do you think of our newsletter? – or would you prefer other methods of keeping informed?
17. Talk about your role as a whānau support worker. Are there particular things that my role could assist you and your family with?
18. 14. remind them of the reasons for the interview – back to the top - and then
19. Is there anything that you would like to talk about that we have not asked you about? Anything else you would like to say?

## Appendix F: Example of questionnaire



1. Are you generally interested in parent children activities organised by the Citizens Preschool and Nursery?

Yes

No

2. Is it better for you to attend such activities in the...:

Morning (until 12am)

Afternoon (until 3pm)

Afternoon (until 5pm)

Evening (until 7pm)

3. How often would you like such an activity to be happened?

Once a month

Once every two month

Once every term

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Would you be interested in:

Fish and Chips day/night

- Children sing star/ disco
- Pamper night
- Art auction and entertainment
- Beauty
- Play and learning display
- Mum and daughter sport day/evening
- Dad and son cooking/baking
- Hairdressing night
- Handcraft
- A special friend day (children can bring grandparents or other relatives)

5. Would you like if at some of such activities people from different backgrounds would come along and would offer possibilities to chat with them.

Possibilities are:

- Winz Caseworker
- Budget Advisor
- Parenting Educator
- Principals from local schools

Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Would you like to have access to a Computer and Internet in the Centre?

- Yes
- No

7. If there was a computer and internet access would you like to get help with:

- Finding information on the internet

- Apply for a job (CV, Cover letter, jobs online)
- Creating email account
- Some knowledge about certain programmes