

# thriving

CONNECTED - REFLECTIVE - EFFECTIVE

## SUE COPAS AND ACTION INQUIRY CONTRIBUTORS

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Know Your Neighbours, Lifewise, and Takapuna Methodist Church 2011

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This resource would not have been possible without the vision, generosity and courage of many people. It is the written outcome of a much larger collaborative action inquiry characterised by weaving diverse relationships and knowledge together to create an innovative whole so much greater than the sum of its parts.

Firstly, to the young parents whose stories form, and inform, the family whānau centre of this work. Thank you for your whole-hearted participation, for taking the time and being willing to share your experiences and insights.

There would be no stories to tell, ideas to share, or challenges to make without the contributions of my fellow action inquirers. To my companion travellers and critical friends on this innovation journey: Annalise Myers, Michelle Ball, Puamiria Maaka, and Rebecca Harrington; thank you seems inadequate. These remarkable women are all social innovators, reflective thinkers and wāhine toa; leading change and making real and lasting differences in the many and varied contexts, organisations, and communities in which they work. Their trust and patience, the hard questions they asked, and the ongoing gift of robust and reflective conversation enabled much of the learning to emerge.

To artist and graphic designer, Henriata Nicholas, a huge thanks. Your gracious presence and amazing talent has added immeasurably to the look and feel of this work.

The whakatauki Ehara taku toa... is attributed to Paterangi of Ngāti Kahungunu. I am grateful for the use of these wise words and acknowledge this original source.

To the internal and external reviewers, thank you for taking the time to engage with and comment on this resource.

My appreciative thanks to all the Families Commission staff who have supported the collaborative process that has brought this resource to life, especially Lynda Murray, Charlie Moore, and Steve Attwood.

The families whānau and staff from the organisations I worked with attest, and I agree, no worthwhile learning journey is without the 'aha' light of discovery and the arduous dark of despair. However, working in authentic collaboration means each extreme and all the in-betweens are shared. The collective accomplishment this resource represents owes much to my colleague and friend Huia O'Sullivan. I am forever grateful for our partnership, a true embodiment of ako, of reciprocal teaching and learning. And most especially for our friendship; your courage, intellect, fortitude and gentle good humour supported and sustained me on this journey; and in no small measure, these qualities are infused throughout the work.

Sue Copas  
Families Commission



**E hara taku toa  
i te toa takitahi,  
engari he toa takitini.**

*Our unity is our strength*



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Having Sue sit alongside the work, being a critical friend, really did enable us to think into our world, our work, and see things anew, especially a wider system that innovation requires us to engage in so as to create better outcomes with families. Working with Sue created time to think; she connected us to challenging literatures that helped to generate critical thinking on other ways, new ways of doing things. The co-creative nature of this resource enabled action inquiry participants to share our knowledge, learnings and stories, and contribute actively to the generative thinking of doing critical reflection together.

**Annalise Myers**

It was a privilege being in conversation with Sue over 18 months and this resource is a stunning outcome. Sue asked thought-provoking questions, introduced us to relevant literatures, and offered examples of what other organisations were doing. These moments of reflection enabled us to pull apart the work we were doing and think critically about it. A family whānau centred approach is engrained in my practice; it's easy to forget that others might not think about the work in this way. It's great to have a resource for others to think their way into this approach.

**Michelle Ball**

A whānau family centred approach is relational, responsive and collaborative. If you're working with families, this approach is key. Lasting outcomes won't be achieved any other way; if the approach is not whānau centred then who is being served? As organisations, how can we possibly know what whānau and communities need and want, if we don't ask them and work with them to achieve desired change. Whānau will only embrace and stay committed to change that they have determined for themselves. A whānau centred approach fosters ownership and responsibility; it may be time and resource intensive but in our experience it does achieve sustainable change.

**Puamiria Maaka**

It looked like a cup of tea and a conversation; it felt like being with someone who is respectful, trustworthy and inquisitive; it worked like an invitation, encouraging us to create the space and take the time to share the highlights of, and the challenges in, our work. Reflecting on our practice gave us a better understanding of what we're about, what role we play and what we're striving for, in seeking positive change for families whānau and communities. This project not only affirmed our approach and situated our contribution in other knowledge and experience, but also articulated principles of practice that will continue to guide what we're doing.

**Rebecca Harrington**

We begin with Peter Block's call for different conversations...

*We seek conversations that create accountability and commitment. The traditional conversations that seek to explain, study, analyse, define tools, and express the desire to change others are interesting but not powerful. They actually are forms of wanting to maintain control. If we adhere to them they become a limitation to the future, not a pathway.*

*The future is brought into the present when people engage each other through questions of possibility, commitment and dissent... Questions open the door to the future and are more powerful than answers in that they demand engagement. Engagement is what creates accountability. How we frame the questions is decisive. They need to be ambiguous, personal and stressful. The way we introduce the questions also matters. We name the distinction the question addresses by stating what is different and unique about this conversation. We give permission for unpopular answers, and inoculate people against advice and help. Advice is replaced by curiosity.*

*(Community: the structure of belonging, 2008, p.101)*

This resource is a provocative and vibrant account of the 'doing it differently together,' that is social innovation. It charts the relational journey made by a group of social innovators comprising staff from the Families Commission, and four exemplary social service organisations, who came together to undertake an 'action inquiry,' to learn more about what we have come to call a family whānau centred approach.

We wanted to document the effects of this approach in situ, and in the process, learn about how it differs from more established thinking and practice. In doing so, we recognised that a family whānau centred approach has different, more inclusive, more robust, values, measures and accountabilities. It's professional, it's personal and it's inclusive – it's about all of us, in it together. Most importantly, it's effective.

In this action inquiry, we used authentic collaboration, a way of working together premised on respectful, more equal relationships and intentional conversations. We found this way of working in itself is a breakthrough; one that creates and sustains the conditions for real, ongoing, and lasting change.

This resource begins with the rationale for our collaborative inquiry, we then discuss the importance of relationships, trust, korero and cups of tea; and set out the key principles of family whānau centred practice. You are then invited to read the stories of three young parents. These stories aim to provide a taste of some of the characteristics and practices of authentic collaboration. We conclude with reflections on our journey and an important challenge to policy, process, practice, and accountability... made by one of the young parents we worked with.

We began this learning journey with curiosity, seeking opportunities to be in relationship and learn together, about the differences that make a difference. Along the way we reflected on our practice and on our learning; we asked challenging questions of each other – questions that were often ambiguous, personal and stressful.

As you engage with this text, we invite you to pause awhile, and do the same.

What part will you play in creating different, more inclusive conversations, commitments, and pathways of possibility for all of us?



AN INVITATION TO CONNECT AND REFLECT



**in it together**

he toa takitini.

ari he toa takitini.

he toa takitini.

ini.





**“If it’s about us, don’t do it without us”**



## Innovative beginnings...

What government, social services and families want and value does not always radically differ. What often differs is the priority families place on particular outcomes and values over time. We believe we must start with families' priorities and motivations if we are to collectively pursue good societies and good lives (Lockett, Schulman, & Vanstone 2010, p.3).

For some time now, and in various ways, the Families Commission has been engaged in a collaborative action inquiry with a small group of exemplary 'next practice'<sup>1</sup> organisations who 'start with families' priorities and motivations,' and put families whānau at the centre of their practice. From previous work we'd learned there were links between this way of working and effective outcomes for families. We'd also learned that good relationships are fundamental to this approach, with the quality of relationships being inseparable from the work to be done.<sup>2</sup>

With this important factor in mind, we set out to build relationships with key staff in next practice organisations and family service delivery initiatives (this process is detailed below), in order to learn more about, what in the course of this work we have come to call, an innovative family whānau centred approach. Understanding that good relationships are premised on trust (Parker et al. 2008), characterised by give-and-take, and fostered through thoughtful constructive discussion among equals, we aimed to be active participants in a conversational and collaborative process.

These expressions – conversation and collaboration - are ubiquitous, particularly within the social services arena. Taken-for-granted, they are used everyday and everywhere, often with little thought given either to their meanings, or to the practices, relationships and commitments they refer to, at any given time.

Not so in this work. We began intentionally, as we meant to go on, by proposing a collaborative action inquiry. That is, researching and learning **with** people, working together as peers, and using conversation as our core action learning process (Bray et al. 2000; Brown & Isaacs 2005; Hurley & Brown 2009). Complex relationship and trust building formed the mainstay of the research process. Active participation was fostered via 'relational engagement,' a process that frames research as intentional conversation, occurring, "within a context that respects the coherence of multiple communities and facilitates dialogue rather than debate" (McNamee 2000, p.23).

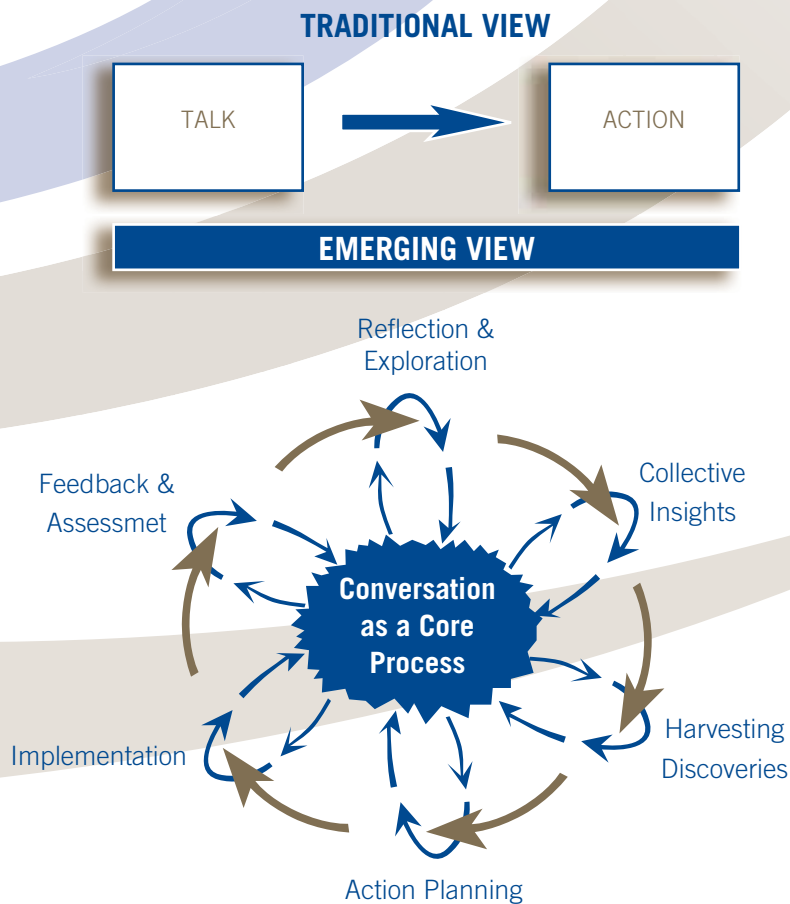
Research and practice were interwoven. Engaging with, and working alongside, people in different organisational roles and areas (from managers and clinical leaders, to community development practitioners, frontline staff and members of the families with whom they worked), we experienced and explored what a family whānau centred approach looked like, felt like, worked like, and for whom in various contexts. Together, in conversation, we reflected on our experiences; the stories and evidence gathered, the ideas, and insights generated, and we considered the implications of this emerging learning for what to do next.

This way of working together, "developing intentional, effective, transforming, timely action inquiry in the midst of everyday life" (Torbert 2004, p.7), is in itself a breakthrough, and creates the conditions for real and ongoing change. It does however require two crucial mind shifts.

1 'Next practice' is a future-oriented concept devised to convey the notion of genuinely new approaches rooted in practice and practical understanding. The term comes from the Innovation Unit – a UK based not for profit social enterprise supporting innovation in the third sector, education, children's services and local government. See [www.innovation-unit.co.uk](http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk)

2 See Appendix 1 for a summary of previous work in this area - called Innovative Practice - in the Families Commission.

The first is the idea of conversation as core process, which debunks the widely held notion that talk and action are somehow separate activities.



**Figure 1: The relationship between talk and action using conversation as a core process (Brown & Isaacs 2005, p.37)**

Conversations are action, because we live in language.

Speaking is the primary and most influential medium of action in the human universe... People who speak of moving from talk to action are apparently not awake to the fact that talk is the essence of action (Torbert 2004, p.27).

Nevertheless in the crazy busyness of ‘doing’ that characterises much of our organisational and personal lives today, speaking as the ‘most influential medium of action’ is something that seems disregarded, forgotten, or simply unknown. Sadly evident here in Aotearoa New Zealand, where the derogatory saying, “We need less hui and more doey,” has particular and lingering currency. Yet:

Since our earliest ancestors gathered in circles around the warmth of a fire, talking together has been our primary means for discovering common interests, sharing knowledge, imagining the future and cooperating to survive and thrive. The natural cross-pollination of relationships, ideas and meaning as people move from one conversation to others, enables us to learn, explore possibilities, and co-create together (Hurley & Brown 2009, p.3).



As important is how we go about the ‘cross-pollination of relationships, ideas and meaning,’ for we are perhaps more deeply influenced by how we speak to one another, than by the content of what we say. This brings us to the second crucial mind shift, understanding what is meant by collaboration.

Collaboration is a paradox; an over-used notion that seems to be everywhere and nowhere. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary to collaborate can mean either “to work jointly” or “to cooperate traitorously with an enemy.” Put the two meanings on either end of a continuum and the difference between configures a very slippery surface. A landscape often shot through with underlying politics and power relations.

The organisations we worked with are aware of this dilemma. As a result they are clear about what collaboration, and collaborative relational processes mean for them, and why their particular way of ‘doing collaboration’ is so effective. We call their approach ‘authentic collaboration’ (and detail the characteristics and practices of this way of working in the section below). So let’s start with a definition and rationale. Here’s the Concise Oxford Dictionary again on what it means to be ‘authentic’ – it means to be “genuine, reliable, and trustworthy.”

When asked, why collaborate authentically? the Clinical Director of one of the next practice organisations we worked with responded, “Because it’s the most effective way to create change.”

The Manukura (Chief Executive) of another put it like this, “We create together, with the people, enhancing all of our lives.”

And that, in a nutshell, is what authentic collaboration is all about. At its heart are people working together in respectful, genuine, and responsive relationships to create effective outcomes that touch everyone. Those involved see themselves as “knowledge equals” (Flood 1999), and recognise the varied and various forms of, knowledge, power, and resources each brings to the work. There is also the value-explicit aim of mutuality – of partnership and reciprocity – working together to ‘enhance all of our lives’.

For the organisations we worked with, authentic collaboration revolves around families – their issues, their priorities, their aspirations and aims. Success is measured by how well services work with and for families, to identify and move towards achieving improved outcomes with and for everyone.

In our action inquiry with next practice organisations, authentic collaboration revolved around learning about, and contributing to, the ‘real time’ development of family whānau centred innovation. This collaboration provided a rare opportunity because:

Knowledge associated with organisational innovation is often informal, context-dependent and embodied as practical wisdom in the person/s or organisation that has it. Therefore it is not an easy area to research empirically (McCalman et al. 2010, p.35).

In the next section we invite you, the reader, into relationship as we explore authentic collaboration further, introduce who was involved in this particular experience of it, and consider what it looks like, feels like, works like, and for whom, along the way.

## Authentic collaboration: a relational journey

Social innovators intend to bring about change, to make a difference, to transform... If you intend to do something you make a deliberate commitment to act to bring about change (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton 2006, p.21, original emphasis).

Hello there, my name is Sue. In this section I'm making a deliberate commitment to bring about change by inviting you to come on a relational journey with me. My intention is to provide you with a taste of the characteristics and practices that support authentic collaboration. What distinguishes this way of working? What does it look like, feel like, work like and for whom? It's already been established that intentional conversations and good relationships premised on trust are at the heart of this work. So as a participant in relationship, and as author of this resource, you would expect me to be present inside the story (Lehmann 2001) in the text, and thereby 'in conversation' with you at this point. After all:

In life's conversations, whom do you trust – the person who never discloses her or his own feelings, who has no interesting life stories to offer in exchange for the details of yours? Or do you trust the person who emerges in the talk as someone living a passionate and reflective life, someone willing to share with you its joys, its pain, its speculations, its ambiguities? (Goodall 2000, p.23)

So let me introduce myself more fully, and let's explore what I, and others, involved in this journey learned along the way.

I joined the Families Commission in May 2009 just after it held a workshop called, *Innovative Practice in Family Services*. Attended by the Minister of Social Development, it profiled six services the Commission had supported to explore the effectiveness of more family-inclusive ways of working. The workshop proved to be a valuable knowledge-sharing exercise.<sup>3</sup>

Following the success of this gathering, the Commission sought to continue developing its role as an 'innovation intermediary.' This role would involve brokering relationships and sharing knowledge within and across sectors to create better conditions for innovation to grow in practice, as well as transferring new ideas and on-the-ground learning into the policy-making arena (Horne 2008).

My role within the Commission's reconfigured Engagement Team enabled me to take up this challenge with enthusiasm. In fact it seemed a serendipitous blending of what Frances Westley (2006) and her colleagues call 'identity and destiny' (p.36), as it combined what I cared about most, with what I do in the world. I came to the role with a professional background in collaborative action research and organisation development. I had some hands-on experience of social innovation – its complexities, challenges, unpredictable unfoldings, and the joy of small yet significant successes along the way (Copas 2004, 2006, 2008). But most importantly, as the mother of a son who experiences a chronic mental illness, I had many years experience negotiating fragmented, complex and often unsupportive services in various sectors. This gave me a lived understanding of some of the challenges facing New Zealand families' whānau today.

Margaret Wheatley (2002) maintains, "It's always like this. Real change begins with the simple act of people talking about what they care about" (p.22). There was no doubt I came to conversations caring deeply about the need for change; caring deeply about the need for more respectful and family inclusive ways of working in this country. I was also aware that key characteristics identified in recent research, typifying innovative, exemplary practice in the area of family services, resonated in both my professional and personal experience (Blagdon 2011; SECPHO, Hancock, & Epston 2009; Cassidy 2009; TIES Team

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1.

2010; Handley et al. 2009; McArthur et al. 2010; New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services 2009; Westley & Antadze 2010).

These features included:

- a welcoming approach
- respect for families
- working **with** families rather than doing things to or for them
- a strengths-based, hope-full (that is, full of hope) approach
- community engagement and ownership
- flexibility and 'organic' growth
- networking and distributed leadership
- being prepared to tackle difficult issues and do things differently
- a willingness to take and manage necessary risk
- critical reflection and learning
- driving optimism, vibrancy, energy and passion
- a commitment and ability to play the 'long game'

My Families Commission role as an 'innovation intermediary' was to build ongoing relationships with key people in exemplary organisations and family service delivery initiatives, to learn more about what they were doing in practice. This task aligned with the Families Commission's strategic goal:

Families have access to appropriate and effective services and support within their communities. Whānau have access and support for whānau ora (Families Commission 2009, p.10).

To this, I added an action inquiry and organisation development dimension. Because the project lined up with my professional expertise and personal commitment to make a difference, it provided me with an opportunity to contribute on a number of levels. The approach and objectives initially proposed were to:

- **Identify key elements and characteristics in situ:** Gather evidence for key elements and characteristics of innovative practices by documenting the organisational kaupapa and family and organisational stories that show how these organisations are working with their communities to build strong family whānau.
- **Transfer learning:** Work with these organisations to identify ways in which learning from these examples of innovative practice can be:
  - Shared and transferred within the organisation to build internal capability. Shared and transferred to other services, sectors and communities, including creating opportunities and platforms for partner organisations to speak for themselves.
  - Circulated and promoted within the government sector to increase knowledge and understanding of the benefits of innovative practice, and to promote policy change.

## EXEMPLARY ORGANISATIONS

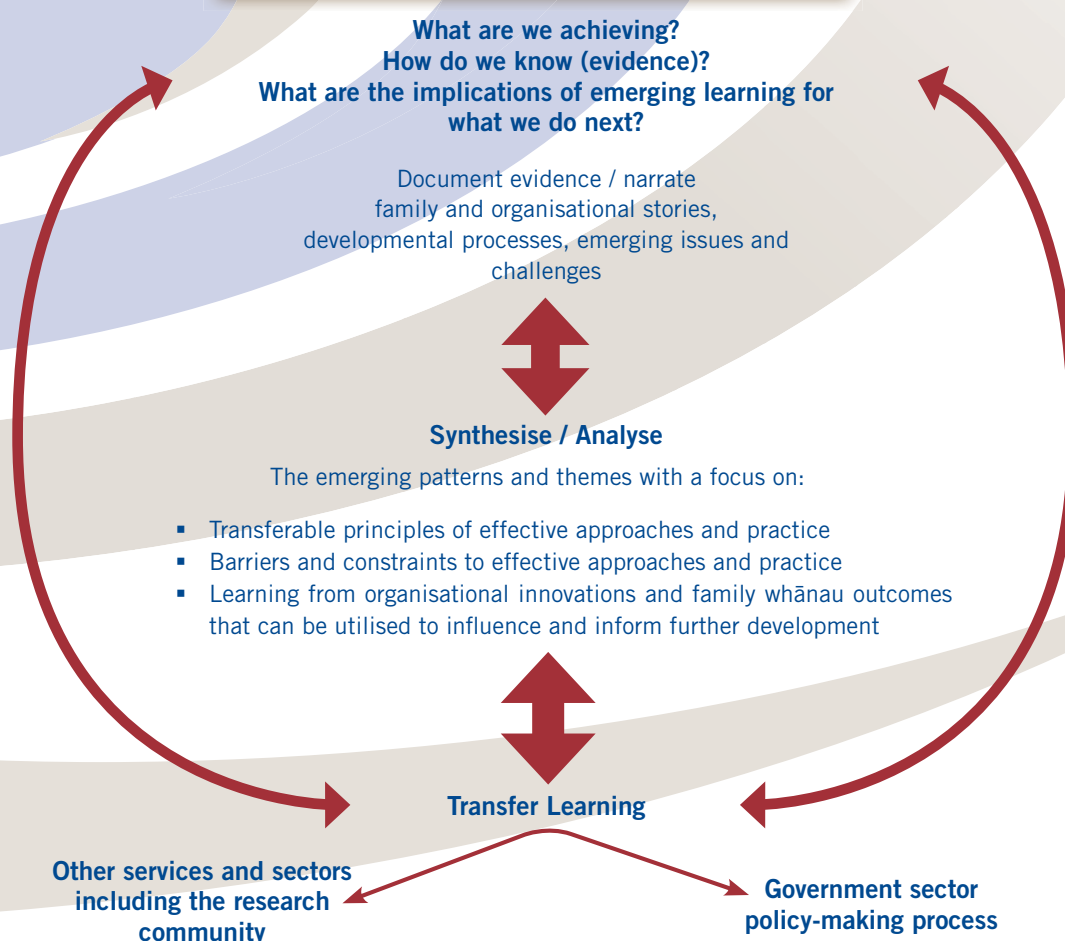


Figure 2: The Collaborative Action Inquiry Process

On reflection, three important factors stand out about my starting point for this work.

Firstly, I was new to working in and for a government organisation. As an autonomous Crown entity (ACE)<sup>4</sup> the Families Commission inhabits interesting territory in the mechanics and machinations of the public sector. Perhaps occupying what Geoff Mulgan (2007) would call the ‘hinterland’ of the public sector... “territory at one remove from the formal structures of accountability and control, where risks and imagination are easier, and where the future is most likely to take shape” (p.10). Initially as a newbie in this arena, I was unaware of the relevance of this positioning. Its significance would unfold as authentic collaborations developed and were maintained (for almost two years now as I write this).

Secondly, I was based in Auckland where the Commission has a small office - its headquarters and the majority of its staff are based in Wellington. Geography proved significant. Away from Wellington, and somewhat protected from its inherently more ‘big government’ focus and timeframes, authentic relational work had a greater opportunity to develop, deepen and flourish over time. This is often the case with social innovation. An ‘outsider’ positioning can have “more freedom from institutional pressures and

<sup>4</sup> The Families Commission is an autonomous Crown entity (ACE), governed by the Families Commission Act 2003. As an ACE, the Commission must have regard to government policy when directed by the responsible Minister. In this case the Minister of Social Development.

constraints, can offer up new perspectives, challenge traditional ways of doing things. [This] different point of view can identify potential that ‘insiders’ often overlook” (Kahn et al. 2009,p.23). In reality, as the work progressed, I occupied dynamic ‘insider-outsider’ positions, in both the Families Commission and the next practice organisations in Auckland.

Engaging with family whānau centred organisations in Auckland I gained a fine-grained appreciation of the day-to-day challenges and effects of building genuine and meaningful relationships with families. I also learned how the responsiveness, flexibility and reflective practice required to support this approach was being built into organisational processes and forms. I was able to contribute academic and organisation development experience to this dimension, adding a new slant to existing ‘insider’ knowledge, strengthening it, and giving practitioners greater confidence to innovate further. As the work evolved, and I ‘earned my stripes’ as a trustworthy contributor to developing relationships with various people, so further connections were made. Initial relationships, collaborations and learning were open and shared. These soon morphed into further relationships, collaborations and learning in an exponential way. A process those of us involved came to call the 1+1=11 plus factor.

Thirdly, while I had a general idea of what I hoped to accomplish (as noted above) my previous professional experience had taught me the value of emergent learning. I began with curiosity. My personal experience was also crucial. I began with empathy. These attributes are important for social innovation.

The starting point for innovation is an awareness of a need that is not being met and some idea of how it could be met... Empathy is the starting point and ethnography<sup>5</sup> is usually more relevant... Personal motivations also play a critical role: people may want to solve their own problems and they may be motivated by the suffering of their friends or family... Some of the most effective methods for cultivating social innovation start from the presumption that people are competent interpreters of their own lives and competent solvers of their own problems (Mulgan et al. 2007, pp. 21-22).

I came to beginning conversations and relationships personally and professionally believing in, and caring about families, my own and others. For me, the work was about family, and family was about us. I found this inclusive, central and guiding value mirrored throughout every next practice organisation I engaged with. It was a great place to embark on a relational journey towards authentic collaboration.

Figure 3 attempts to represent how authentic collaboration works. These are the characteristics and practices that support its development, maintain its momentum, and ensure its effectiveness. As touched on above, at the heart of this approach are strengths-based peer relationships premised on trust and respect. That is, people working together with professional will and personal humility (Collins 2001) in responsive, flexible and persistent ways to create and contribute to something larger and more lasting than themselves. In the organisations I worked with, this was often described as supporting families to thrive, with the long term outcome of intergenerational change. Alongside this, are explicit reflective practices that eschew a detached, deficit and problem-centred approach. Rather, people work in relationship with families whānau, focusing on their abilities and opportunities for actual change, nurturing outcomes with a commitment over time to support them to achieve their goals.

<sup>5</sup> Ethnography is the term given to a form of qualitative research using a variety of methods. It is generally characterised by the formation and maintenance of relationships in a particular field of inquiry (for example a culture, a community, an organisation), for an extended period of time. Bud Goodall (2000) perhaps best describes ethnography as, “the result of a lot of reading, a disciplined imagination, hard work in the field and in front of the computer, and solid research skills, all of which are crafted into compelling stories, narratives or accounts” (p.10).

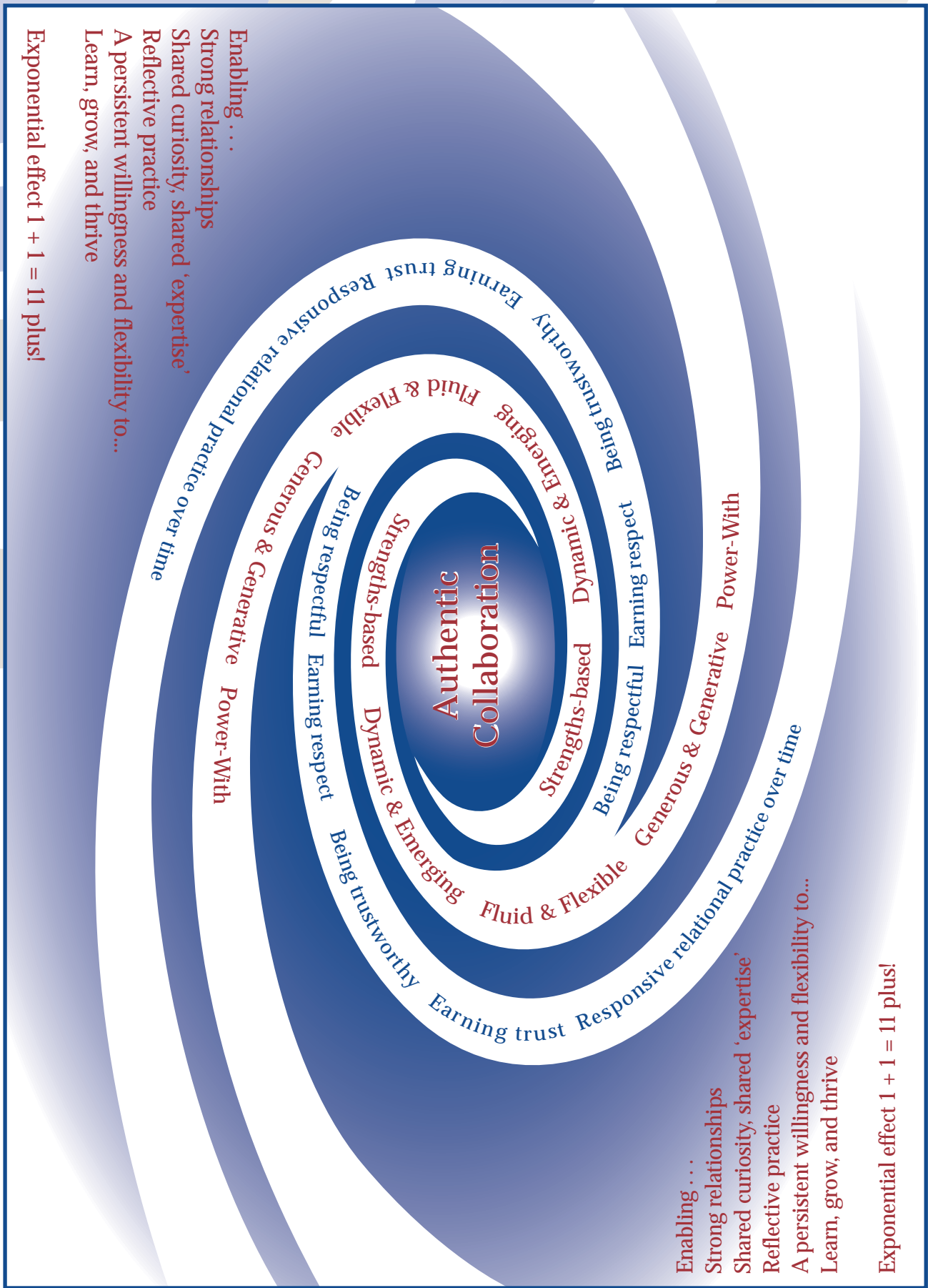


Figure 3: Authentic Collaboration - Characteristics & Practices



## Relationship, relationship, relationship...

“Authentic collaboration eh... I think I prefer the word ‘genuine.’ Authentic is kinda hard core... it’s a bit academic Sue. I mean what was it you fellas actually did differently that mattered so much?”

“I like that,” I muse in reply... “Hmmm... what’s the difference that makes the difference... nice!”

The question is rhetorical. Part of the action inquiry team, the inquirer knows full well what it was we did differently (and here I return to first person plural – to ‘we’ – to denote our ‘in it together’ relationship). But beginnings and back stories are important. The time taken to establish good relational foundations repays the initial investment with huge dividends. As this woman, a recognised leader, reflective thinker and community development change agent well knows from her own practice and experience working with exemplary organisations.

Back in July 2009 this work had a good relational start... with ‘I’ becoming ‘we’ early in the action inquiry process. The ‘we’ refers to key staff from four exemplary next practice organisations who are introduced in more detail below. But first, let’s look at two important differences – trust and experience - that made the difference, although in different ways, at the beginning of this journey.

### Trust and how it matters

I was introduced to two exemplary next practice organisations – Te Waipuna Puawai<sup>6</sup> and Lifewise<sup>7</sup> by a community development practitioner with over 20 years experience in community and organisational development. While this practitioner had a connection with the Families Commission through previous work in Wellington, I was welcomed into both Te Waipuna Puawai and Lifewise through the esteem and high regard held for work with these organisations and their communities in Auckland. Trust matters. And when trust is placed in you, on the strength of little relational experience of you, then what you do with that trust matters even more.

In my first conversations with Puamiria Maaka, Te Waipuna Puawai’s Manukura, and John McCarthy, General Manager of Lifewise, I talked about what had brought me to the work (similar to how I’ve done in this text). In each conversation they reciprocated, sharing their backgrounds and the personal and professional social justice drivers that had brought them to their respective roles. I had a first glimpse of their passion for innovation and reflective learning, and we began to explore how we might work together.

### Korero and cups of tea: always be willing to listen

Early on, Puamiria told me how the relational history of Te Waipuna Puawai informs the work today. How the Sisters of Mercy were invited into Glen Innes (in East Auckland) by a group of Māori women. And how, some time later, over a three year relationship building process, of “korero and cups of tea,” the focus shifted from women and children ‘at risk’, to the development of women and children. “We are about responding to what’s named by the women... we wait... and they will tell us,” Puamiria told me.

‘Korero and cups of tea’ featured again not long after, when John McCarthy introduced me to Rebecca Harrington, a community development worker coordinating the Know Your Neighbours (KYN) Project on Auckland’s North Shore. Know Your Neighbours, a partnership initiative between Lifewise and the Takapuna Methodist Church is collaboratively building connections and relationships between neighbours in specific areas on the North Shore. “We ask people what they want,” Rebecca told me, “and we take the time to listen to what they have to say. Time is key for me; you have to take an open-ended approach, and ask people, and keep on asking, and always be willing to listen.”

“Sometimes it’s hard,” said this reflective practitioner. “You need the support of an organisation that knows this, and people who appreciate the time it takes, and the messiness.” Ever the critical thinker, she also revealed, “Good questions to keep asking of yourself and others as you go along, are, ‘what difference might this make, how, and for whom?’”

6 Established in 1999, Te Waipuna Puawai is a community development initiative of Nga Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand, a Catholic Religious Congregation of women. Sisters of Mercy were the first religious sisters to come to Aotearoa New Zealand, arriving in Auckland from Ireland in 1850. See: [www.twp.org.nz](http://www.twp.org.nz)

7 Lifewise is an Auckland-based community organisation that traces its roots back over 150 years as part of the Methodist Church of New Zealand. See: [www.lifewise.org.nz](http://www.lifewise.org.nz)

**“We’re about listening to young people... growing and moving as needs change and issues arise.”**

The foundations for my relationship with the Auckland Women’s Centre (AWC)<sup>8</sup> Teen Parent Project were already in place, established through a longstanding connection between AWC and the Families Commission. One aspect involved a group of young parents contributing their knowledge and experience to the Commission’s Families Panels.<sup>9</sup> Families Panels work with various groups on a two-year engagement cycle and this was drawing to a close at the time I began exploring possibilities for learning more about innovative family whānau centred practice. Good experiences within established relationships between AWC and Commission staff provided me firm relational footing, and the idea of intentional learning about innovation, while ‘doing innovation,’ sparked particular interest. “We’re not about keeping on delivering what we’ve been doing for awhile,” said Annalise Myers, the Teen Parent Centre Development Manager, in one of our early conversations. “We’re about listening to young people; we’re about growing and moving as needs change and issues arise.” It was my first encounter with a big picture strategic thinker who works intuitively and relationally, gathering and galvanising those around her to effect multilayered action.

### **How can we improve to help families whānau?**

My relationship with the Anglican Trust for Women and Children (ATWC)<sup>10</sup> began with a road trip. Then Chief Families Commissioner, Dr Jan Pryor, was interested to learn more about ‘one stop shops,’ a term used to describe organisations that are moving towards providing a networked range of family services and support within one physical location. Keen to see these family centres in action and hear about the effects of their work first-hand, Jan organised to visit a number of exemplars around the country. These centres are busy places, often located in areas of high need. However, Jan’s position as Chief Families Commissioner, coupled with her extensive knowledge and experience in the area of family studies (she was the inaugural Director of Victoria University’s Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families), instilled trust and opened doors. Jan is also an inclusive relational practitioner, and we travelled together as peers on the Auckland leg of her journey. My initial meeting with the Chief Executive and the Clinical Director of ATWC was a consequence of her quiet encompassing enthusiasm to share with, and learn from, others.

In a subsequent first conversation with Michelle Ball, the Clinical Director, I began to get to know an innovative, reflective, systems thinker, as she shared her passion; courage and intellect from the get go. “It’s important not to be blind-sided by attachment to a particular model or way of doing things,” she told me. “We are hopeful, not only for the families but in term of the agency (ATWC). How can **we improve** to help families? If you are working toward self-determination for families you need to be for your staff as well.”

### **The difference that made the difference**

Trust and experience – differently inflected – along with a willingness to make further relational investments to trust and share experience together... This was the difference that made the difference at the beginning.

“We don’t get to hear about, and feel, relational beginnings that often do we?” my interlocutor muses.

“No we don’t, and that’s surprising. Remember Margaret Wheatley (2002) I quoted earlier, “real change begins with the simple act of people talking about what they care about” (p.22). People in exemplary organisations understand this. They begin from a place of listening to, and caring about, the families whānau (and the

<sup>8</sup> The Auckland Women’s Centre is a feminist organisation for women. Part of the Auckland community since 1975, it offers a range of services and courses in ways that respect and empower women. See: [www.awc.org.nz](http://www.awc.org.nz)

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 2 for an overview of the Families Panels process.

<sup>10</sup> ATWC is one of Auckland’s oldest not-for-profit organisations, tracing its origins back to 1858. It offers a range of services and supports to families in homes, schools and the community. See: [www.atwc.org.nz](http://www.atwc.org.nz)



colleagues) they work with. To do this effectively, they build long-term, genuine and meaningful relationships, by taking down the walls.”

“What do you mean by that?”

The question is important, the answer even more so, for it signals a key factor at the heart of social innovation. That is, innovation oriented towards making effective, lasting and systemic change (Huddart 2010; Mulgan et al. 2007; Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan 2010; Poutiatine 2009; Westley & Antadze 2010). The answer involves understanding that:

Everything is in *relationship*, connected and interdependent. Nothing exists in isolation. *Wholeness* is the essential nature of reality. In disciplines from chemistry, to biology, to quantum physics, to brain research ... the greatest minds of today are demonstrating that life is a unified and interdependent whole... [B]ridges and connections are more prevalent and important than boundaries (Anderson & Ackerman Anderson 2001, p.118, original emphasis).

Before we can make ‘bridges and connections,’ we need to take down the walls. In many ways this action inquiry process mirrored the relational approach exemplary organisations take with families whānau – beginning with the understanding that we’re on a learning journey together. It’s professional, it’s personal, and it’s about all of us. So we take down the walls... we dismantle all those categories and ‘power-over’ forms of knowledge and status we’ve created that differentiate and exclude, that hide the fact we are ‘in it together,’ that often excuse us from caring about each other, from being accountable to each other, and achieving good outcomes together.

When we begin inclusively with a commitment to being in relationship there is no ‘them’ and ‘us.’ There is no categorisation... no ‘vulnerable,’ ‘dysfunctional,’ or ‘hard to reach’ families whānau. There is no hierarchical status and power attributed to different forms of knowledge and expertise, rather there is the individual and collective recognition of the contribution our different knowledge and abilities can make to working together toward effective outcomes.

#### Notice....

- **Beginnings and back stories are important:** the time taken to establish good relationships pays huge dividends. This is true for relationships between service providers, between service providers and government agencies, and between service providers and the families whānau they work with.
- **Organisations need to build relationships by listening to those they work with:** “We are about responding to what’s named by the women... we wait... and they will tell us. “Puamiria Maaka, Manukura, Te Waipuna Puawai.
- **Investing time is important.** “We ask people what they want, and we take the time to listen to what they have to say. Time is key... you have to take an open-ended approach, and ask people, and keep on asking, and always be willing to listen.” Rebecca Harrington, Community Development Worker, Know Your Neighbours Project.
- **Organisations need to constantly be looking at how they can improve:** Social innovation is an ongoing journey we take together, it’s professional, it’s personal, and it’s about all of us.

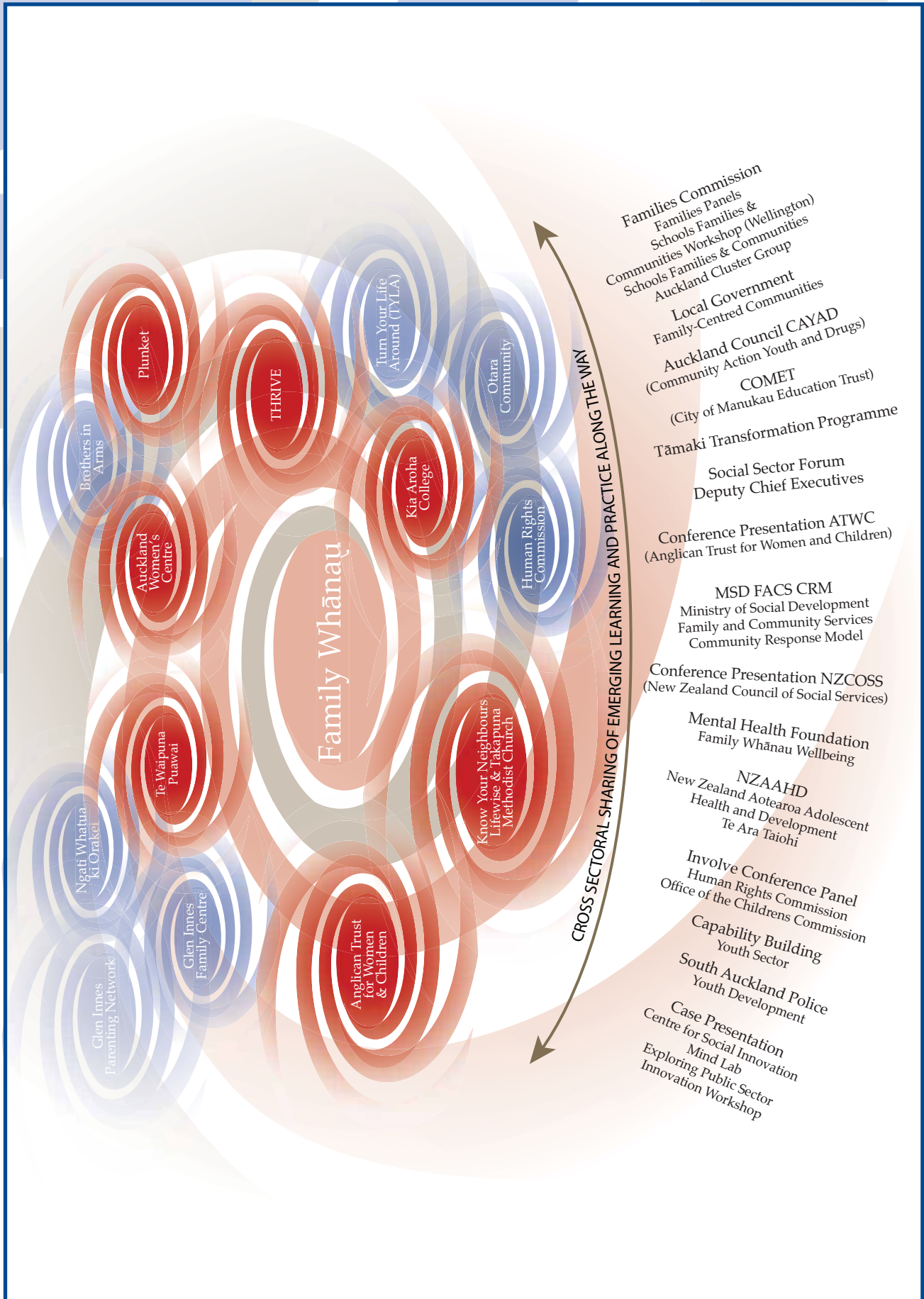


Figure 4: Collaborations & Learning Opportunities

There is an acknowledgement of what Ron Labonte (1997) calls power-from-within, and power-with.

Power-from-within is the personal power I have, my energy, self-knowledge, self-discipline, character. It is shaped by my world, and by my beliefs, but it is still about me, and what I can claim as my own. Power-with is the collective side of power-from-within. It is the energy and optimism we create when we act together. It is the greater strength we develop... when we pool our different abilities and learn from one another. Power-from-within and power-with do not have a clear material base. They are more connected with feelings and energy flows between people. They are about how we treat one another in thought, words and action – with respect rather than mere tolerance, with a desire for others' security and growth rather than simply our own self interest (pp.. 36-37).

As our action inquiry with exemplary organisations progressed, we continued to mirror and develop this concept of 'power-with,' and the incumbent responsive-relational practices that form, and sustain, the heart of authentic collaboration.

We did so because it is our assertion that authentic collaboration is both the basis of, and a catalyst for, deep learning and effective change. The approach works because as we have discussed above, deep learning and effective change are premised on two powerful foundation assumptions – high involvement and a systemic approach (Holman, Devane, & Cady 2007). So what better way to test and develop this assertion than in cycles of reflective inquiry and action, shared and validated in different contexts over time (Bradbury-Huang 2010).

A few months into the journey, my colleague Huia O'Sullivan joined the Families Commission (we had worked together previously in another organisation). A skilled relational practitioner, Huia began to work with staff and families whānau at the service interface (Parker & Heapy 2006) at Te Waipuna Puawai and Kia Aroha College, adding another context and dimension to our practice-based evidence and action learning. Through the words and images of its action inquiry contributors, the resulting resource, "Thriving in Practice" – a companion document to this one, shows what family whānau centred practice looks like, feels like and works like, up close and personal, amongst the communities of East and South Auckland (O'Sullivan & Action Inquiry Contributors 2011).

Figure 4 details this wider context, the exemplary organisations we worked with, some of the cross-organisational collaborations involved, and a number of the many learning opportunities we took to share and test emerging insights and practice along the way. This open and inclusive learning process enabled us to establish validity for "actionable knowledge" (Gabriel 2002, p.136) – knowledge that has validity based on its usefulness and its "actionability" (Bradbury-Huang 2010, p.363) in multiple contexts over time.

For almost two years our collaborative inquiry cycled through repeated phases of action and reflection. Core conversations were infused with critical reflective questions from the practice-based evidence gathered and synthesised, and from a wide range of literature read and shared. From this process, across contexts and organisations we have distilled three key transferable principles of family whānau centred innovative practice – detailed on the pages overleaf.

To these principles we have added a number of questions. Because, echoing Peter Block (2008), our work together taught us, if you want to create change, find powerful questions. "Questions create the space for something new to emerge" (p.103).

Powerful questions are those that in answering, evoke a choice for accountability and commitment... They engage people in an intimate way, confront them with their freedom and invite them to cocreate a future possibility (p.105).



Whole Systems & Collaborative Approach

Family Whānau

Responsive-Relational Practice Over Time

### ***Key Principles of Family Whānau Centred Innovative Practice***

- Family whānau are at the centre of everything; of policy, process and practice. Service providers adopt a strengths-based authentic collaboration with families whānau. They work together to identify issues and aspirations that become the focus of attention for setting and achieving improved outcomes.
- Work is collaborative and oriented to developing a whole systems approach. It is holistic and systemic, working broadly within and across families whānau, communities, organisations and sectors.
- Practice is responsive-relational and continues over time. This means work is built around the development of respectful, trustworthy and responsive relationships with families whānau, other agencies and service providers – both Not-for-Profit and Government. Services and supports adopt a flexible ‘what it takes’ attitude to achieve whatever goals or outcomes are initially set and/or emerge as relationships develop.

It is important to note the crucial difference between effective principles of practice and the more widely used terms ‘models’ and ‘best practice’ (often associated with a programmatic framework). As with some programmes, ‘models’ and ‘best practices’ are specific and often highly prescriptive. In contrast, effective principles provide guidance and allow for variations of context, situations and circumstance. Guiding principles are readily transferable. A metaphor is the recipe - ‘add a teaspoon of salt’ = best practice prescription, and ‘season to taste’ = effective guidance principle (Patton 2011).

## *Key Principles of Family Whānau Centred Innovative Practice: Inquiry Questions*

What do the webs and interconnections of systems thinking look like, feel like, work like – and for whom?

How do you/will you invest time to see, think and do complexity and interconnection?

Power-With: How do you/will you identify and respectfully engage everyone who needs to be in the room?

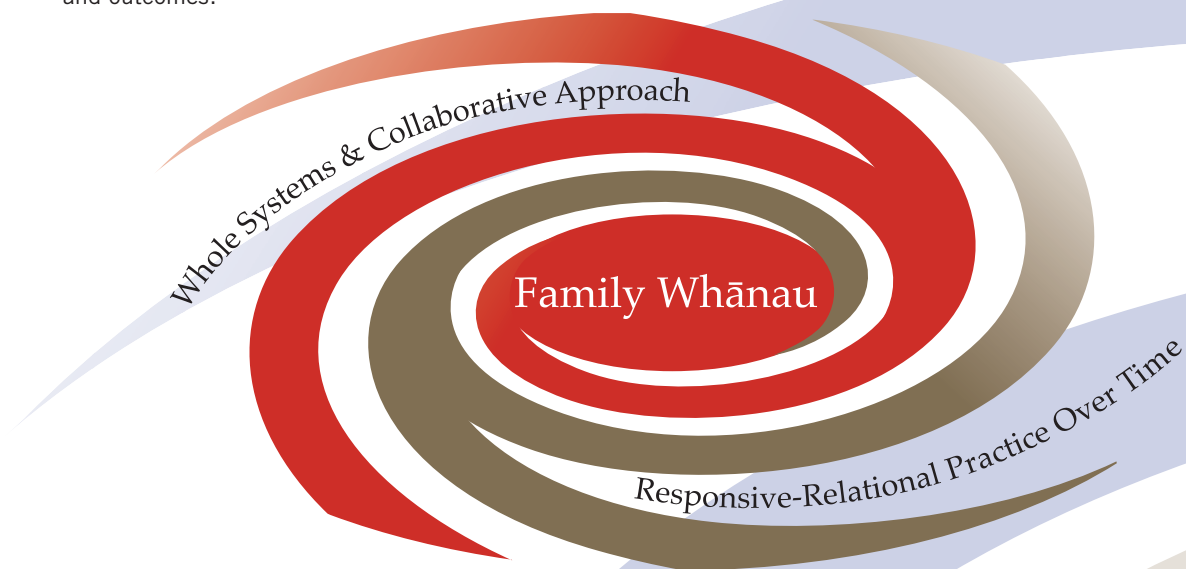
How do you/will you work together to collectively identify and explore each others assumptions and interests? Then... how do you/will you find and expand common ground, and jointly take ownership of, and be accountable for, agreed processes and outcomes?

What do you mean by authentic collaboration?

What does authentic collaborative practice look like, feel like, work like – and for whom?

How do you/will you develop and support authentic collaborative practice?

How do you/will you recognise, and then work with, a collaboration that is not working?



How do you/will you develop and support responsive relational practice?

How do you/will you develop and support reflection in and on your responsive-relational practice?

How do you/will you develop and support staff to work responsively within reflective, dynamic, and authentically collaborative relationships – doing ‘what it takes’ with families and colleagues over time?

What do you mean by respect?

How might your definition of respect be the same as, or different from, the families whānau you are working with and for?

What does authentic collaboration **with** families whānau look like, feel like, work like?

How do you/will you position and keep family whānau at the centre of everything, everyday? Policy, practice, funding, accountability...?

How do you/will you lead, resource, and support the development of a family whānau centred approach as core strategy in your organisation?

How do you/will you create the organisational will and dedication to weave authentic collaboration into your organisational fabric?

How do you/will you negotiate and balance the inevitable tensions - a persistent willingness to hang in there and do ‘what it takes’ with families whānau over time, with the need for ‘runs on the board’ (short and medium term goals and outcomes) while still playing the long game?



## And so to the conversations...

One of the inquiry questions we ask of a family whānau centred approach is, “What does authentic collaboration with families whānau look like, feel like, work like?”

In the following stories we aim to provide a taste of some of the characteristics and practices - the look, feel and work like - of authentic collaboration, through conversations with three young parent families.

We have chosen to focus on young parents for two important reasons. Firstly, we wanted to profile the work of two exemplary organisations, Te Waipuna Puawai and AWC’s Teen Parent Project (which became a new agency, THRIVE Teen Parent Support Trust, during this action inquiry). In the course of this action inquiry, we have seen first-hand how early engagement and time invested to develop and maintain strong and responsive relationships with young parents and their children is repaying the investment exponentially, creating the potential for intergenerational change. Staff working with young parents are well aware that safe and trusting relationships are not to be taken lightly, particularly in the intergenerational space. New work in brain development also endorses this critical factor, claiming, “Children and adolescents... probably engage more effectively in brain-altering learning when they are face-to-face, mind-to-mind, and heart-to-heart” (Cozolino & Sprokay 2006, p.12). As the conversations to follow show, the families we meet here are all working ‘heart-to-heart’ with staff who care about them.

Secondly, we wanted to take down the walls around the category ‘teenage parents.’ We use the inclusive term ‘young parents’ explicitly, to refer to young women and men, mothering and fathering their children. Beyond many of the assumptions and judgements that tend to swirl around pregnant and parenting young people, we aim to provide a glimpse of the world through their eyes, in order to gain a better understanding of their values, priorities and motivations, and of what’s going on for them and their children.

The conversations foreground the first principle of family whānau centred practice. That is, family whānau are positioned at the centre of everything, and so it was important to have the young parents speak predominantly, “in their own voices and on their own terms” (Swartz 2011, p.60, original emphasis). The first story, ‘Doing what it takes,’ is told from the point of view of Annalise, one of our action inquiry contributors. The following stories, ‘Stepping it up’ and ‘Connected, supported interdependent,’ are written entirely in the words of the young parents. The glimpses we provide have been crafted from specific ‘research conversations’ where the young parents discussed their experiences of parenthood with a trusted staff member.

Each family is different, and each conversation is presented differently, using various established techniques for writing research evocatively to convey the relational spirit in which it was undertaken (Glesne 1997; Frost et al. 2000; Bochner & Ellis 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot 2000; Sparkes et al. 2003; Richardson 1992, 2002; Ward 2011).

So let’s meet the young parents<sup>11</sup>, ‘listen’ to what they have to say, and notice the difference that being in relationship is making for them.

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<sup>11</sup> To preserve their anonymity the young parents chose pseudonyms for themselves and their children.

**in conversation with families whānau**



## **“We’re kinda just like everyone else”... doing what it takes**

Knocking on the front door of the tiny flat I startle as a dog barks. It takes me a moment to remember she’s noisy but harmless in that affable ‘in your face’ big dog way. Not that Isabel would agree with me. I remember our last conversation...

“I need Lucas to get rid of the dog, ‘cause I can’t handle her. It sounds quite selfish, but the space thing for me is really a big issue, I don’t have enough space, I’m not thinking properly, there’s not enough flow.”

I’ve known Isabel for a number of years. Long enough to know that space and a sense of order and flow are important, not only in her mothering role caring for little children, but also for her own wellbeing. Her first baby, Riley, was tiny when she originally engaged with the young mums support group. Since then she’s been involved with SKIP,<sup>12</sup> our leadership programme, and made important contributions to our community research project, as we’ve worked to develop a family whānau centred teen parent service in Auckland.

Warm, generous, gentle, and struggling at the moment, it’s a privilege to work with Isabel and her partner Lucas as they negotiate their way through a whole lot of things going on in their lives. Today I’m here to return a transcript of a research conversation. It’s another contribution these two are making towards helping us understand the lives of young parents better.

As I wait on the porch, I think about that conversation just over a week ago. How Isabel, at twenty one years old, was keen to talk about the normality of their lives.

“Just like any normal life, any normal relationship, it has its ups and downs.”

Lucas and Isabel got together when Matilda, Isabel’s second daughter, was six months old. Although not their biological parent, at twenty three, Lucas is a father in every sense to Riley (now four) and Matilda (now two).

“Well I love Isabel a lot. I guess when we first got together it was sort of like a combo package,” Lucas smiles. “Like I got the girls with Isabel, and it’s been worth it all the way. Life’s interesting, challenging, rewarding, fun, nerve-wracking at times, but generally quite good. It’s worth it eh,” he reiterates.

The dog barks. Isabel flinches.

“You’re not talking about that dog are you?” Although she sighs loudly, there’s a sing-song note to Isabel’s question.

“No I’m talking about you!” Lucas laughs.

I chuckle at the byplay, noticing the warmth between them. I’ve always had a sense that Isabel and Lucas are first and foremost, best friends. When asked what life was like at the moment, Lucas initially responded with a self-effacing grin and a non-committal “interesting.” After a reassuring glance from Isabel he went on, “it changes, it changes quite a lot, it’s quite challenging... and rewarding, it’s very rewarding watching the kids develop, achieving new things pretty much everyday.”

<sup>12</sup> SKIP – Strategies with Kids Information for Parents. SKIP is an initiative led by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) for parents and caregivers of children from birth to five years.



When I first met Lucas he was off work following a head injury accident. It was quite a hard time for him because he's a doer. While recovering, he threw himself into our community research project. Every time we'd meet he'd ask, 'Right, are we having a sausage sizzle? How do we raise money for this new teen parent centre? He was always in there wanting to do something.

Back in the workforce now and supporting his family financially, Lucas is looking to get ahead.

"Before the accident I used to have guys under me, I'd organise them and show them what to do. I'm truck driving now and looking for a new job, better opportunities. Having responsibility is good and something linked with machinery, I need to think when I'm working otherwise I get bored."

There's no doubt Isabel appreciates Lucas.

"I love that I can be a stay at home mum," she tells me. "That's pretty much it, actually, at the moment. And of course I love having Lucas here 'cause without him things would be so much harder. We get bored a bit, but that's mostly... as I said before... I've just been diagnosed with depression."

Isabel is passionate about parenting. Part of our work as a teen parent service is to quietly support her through some of her anxiety and sadness as she grapples with her ideal of parenting and the reality of caring for small children. To help her carve out some time for her own development, and learn what everyday happiness looks and feels like for her. We call this responsive-relational practice, others call it, 'what it takes' (Fels Smyth & Schorr 2009; Boulden 2010). I can't help but compare this approach and its possibilities with what happened when she visited her doctor recently.

"My doctor just asked me a bunch of questions like, 'what are your symptoms'? That was the only question he asked me actually. 'What are your symptoms? Yep, sounds like you've got depression.' Didn't even offer counselling or anything, just gave me the antidepressants and out the door I went. I think I was in the doctor's consultation room for about five minutes."

Isabel's experience working with staff at the Teen Parent Support Service is very different.

"Oh I love the Centre I've found them so helpful in every way possible. Even just like when I've needed to talk to somebody. Once Gaby (our SKIP coordinator and young mothers' support worker) called me about something, and I was in the bathroom at Dressmart and I burst into tears. 'Aahh Gaby, I just crashed my car, and I don't know what to do, I'm trying to find a job, I don't have a CV...' And she said, 'look catch the next taxi into the Centre, come and have a coffee with me, I'll buy you some lunch and we'll talk.' What an amazing service, seriously that is awesome!"

There are always different layers and levels in getting to know each other. Isabel's recollection of that particular day reminds me how hard she tried to get a job last year. As part of that process she applied for a teen parent engagement position at the Centre. We turned crafting her CV and the subsequent interview into a learning opportunity, allowing her to explore what she really wants to do. Two things stood out. The value she placed on parenting, and knowing about what works for children, and her anxiety about leaving her own children with other people. The process helped her realise it was not the right time to be applying for a job. Rather, that mothering - growing up with her children - as generations before her have done, is exactly what she wants and needs to be doing at present.

As I reflect on the choices and challenges Isabel and Lucas are facing, so similar to those of many families, I knock again, louder this time. Hurried footsteps overlay children's voices. A somewhat distracted Isabel opens the door into the tiny living area. Riley and Matilda happily occupied on the floor beyond, glance up briefly before returning to their game.

"Hi Annalise, come on in." And then to the girls, "Hey you two look who's here!" Riley lifts her head, and considers me again momentarily.

"I call her my butterfly, she just flutters along, she's really happy, it's nice she's happy, it makes me happy and in turn everyone's happy."

Keeping everyone happy is no easy task. As Isabel and I chat about the research, the teen parent centre development work, and life in general, our conversation turns to the most pressing issue she and Lucas are facing. And it's a biggie. A 'where to from here' question about work for Lucas that could take the family in a very different direction. Exciting potential beckons, but keeping everyone happy will be a challenge.

Lucas has gained a place on a mine drilling course in Greymouth in the South Island. Upon finishing the course he's been told lucrative jobs in the mines in Australia are all but assured. While Isabel would dearly like to move from the cramped flat, she recognises the prospect of moving to the South Island, let alone another country, is daunting.

Threaded through our conversation is her awareness of feeling depressed, "it's kinda hard for me to find the motivation to do things," her appreciation of the important support her mother provides, "she's completely changed her whole work schedule to fit around Riley's kindy," and on another level, her deeply held desire to one day have a career of her own, and where she might fit this into the larger and ever evolving scheme of things.

As I listen to Isabel talk of the choices, aspirations and dilemmas grounded in the day-to-day experience of relationships – with Lucas, with Riley and Matilda, with her Mum, and importantly, with herself, I am reminded of the many and quite patently wrong assumptions that are often made about young parents. Isabel couldn't have put it better, "we're kinda just like everyone else" she remarked assertively and passionately early on in our 'research conversation'. As I and other staff at the centre have built genuine relationships with Isabel and Lucas over time we've not only been privileged to gain deep understandings of what is going on in their lives, we've also been able to see the world through their eyes and appreciate how hard they're working to make a life together, looking after their girls and each other. Just like everyone else.



## Being in Relationship: Noticing the Difference that Makes the Difference to Achieving Effective Outcomes

**Notice** when authentic relationships with families are the vehicle for change we prioritise resources and time to support this way of working.

Compare the effect of the doctor's response to Isabel's distress, with Gaby's. Not only did Gaby show real concern for Isabel's wellbeing, she was also able to take effective and timely action. This is because THRIVE takes an approach that:

- Builds flexible, responsive resourcing into the organisation's practice framework. For example, access to transport is a real challenge for many young parents. THRIVE's commitment to provide accessible services extends to free transport for teen parent families.<sup>13</sup> The effect of this 'what it takes' approach added an important face-to-face dimension to the immediate support Gaby could offer to Isabel.
- Invests time to build partnerships with families. This key aspect makes it possible for Gaby to build deep and ongoing relationships with Isabel, Lucas and their girls. She is also organisationally supported to exercise her professional judgement on an 'as and when' basis, appropriate to achieving agreed outcomes. In this instance her timely action enabled Isabel to refocus back to what she was trying to achieve, recover confidence, and move on with dignity.

**Notice** these relationships are reciprocal. Isabel and Lucas are engaged with, and give back to THRIVE. They have both participated in THRIVE's young parent research and leadership programme, contributing energy, knowledge and a commitment to share their learning and experience with others.

**Notice** the centrality of Lucas and Isabel's values, priorities and aspirations. A family whānau centred approach requires this. In conversation we learn what matters to Isabel and Lucas, and why. Like many other families they value working and parenting. Their desire for everyday happiness involves doing both well. This knowledge informs the development of a strengths-based partnership with the family where effective support and outcomes can be explored, negotiated and reviewed together. In this dynamic process Isabel and Lucas are able to continue learning from their successes and failures, and find new and better ways to achieve their goals.

<sup>13</sup> "Taxis, petrol vouchers or reimbursement of public transport costs enables transportation to and from the Centre." - see [www.awc.org.nz](http://www.awc.org.nz)

## Reflections on being a father – “stepping it up”

### Baby

Hard out she's precious  
Only three years old  
it's cool as

At first I didn't think it was that cool  
I didn't know how to react  
with a daughter.  
I was like  
oh no,  
how am I going to have my baby now  
how am I going to do this  
with no food and everything

### Doing it

At first when I was doing baby at home  
my sister, she was like  
you can't look after her, you can't do this...

You're putting me down  
Why?

Just block it out and try my hardest

In the end I sort of stepped it up  
I'll do it  
I won't ask you for any help

I tried to do it all on my own

Had to move outta home  
me and baby at the same house  
with my brother, my sister  
my mum and her boyfriend  
everyone in the same house

I'm scabbing off them for food  
for both of us  
my mum has hardly any food  
when me and baby are there  
we're always eating you know

### Family

I started chilling with my neighbours  
like hanging out with them  
and their kids

Mum took my baby over there  
just to say  
“this is my moko”  
we just started connecting like that

Their like, “you guys hungry?  
have a feed here  
come over in the morning  
have breakfast with us.”

Now she’s got family where we stay  
the people around us  
are really family  
they love her  
they’re not even family  
but they love her

### Relating

I got to learn how to tell my baby  
how me and Mum separated  
why we separated and  
how we still care for each other  
for you  
no matter what happens we still love each other  
for you

That time just before ‘J’ stormed off  
she was like... “Daddy I will come with you but I still love my Mum”  
I was shocked  
I’d never, never thought about that you know

To choose  
Yeh

My Mum and them split up  
I felt stink  
how my Dad took off  
I had to stay  
with my Mum  
but I wanted to go  
with my Dad  
but I also wanted to stay  
with my Mum  
that’s what made me think about it

I was a bit older  
when my Mum separated from my Dad  
still  
I couldn’t handle it

Because I had been through a little bit of it  
that’s stink  
I feel so bad for you  
like sorry  
and you’re only three  
and you’re saying these words to me

### Trying my hardest

I’ve got to be here  
to do things for my daughter  
I want to show everybody  
that I’m trying

My plan this week  
was Monday morning  
get up get on the phone  
to the lawyers

I've got three certificates  
from you guys  
one from Brothers-in-Arms  
two from you guys  
the Women's Centre

I showed my lawyer  
he was really impressed

My family's been telling me...  
keep doing what you're doing  
if all fails  
you tell your daughter  
at least you tried your hardest  
no matter what anyone says  
You tried your hardest

Got to handle it at the moment  
and just hope for the best...

#### **For Baby and me**

Just to have a stable house  
a roof over our head  
with me paying the rent

To just be a good father

To take her to school  
'cause I think it's all about her school  
education for her  
'cause I didn't really have that

I'm going back  
I gotta learn for some school  
just jumped on a computer course  
gotta start back to the basics

She can fly through school I reckon  
Only three years old and she's really on to it  
She's real smart

That's what I want to do  
get a house  
take her to school  
go to my own course  
gets me up skilled

"I think I'm ready to be a Dad"



**Being in Relationship: Noticing the Difference that Makes the Difference to Achieving Effective Outcomes.**

**Notice** this young man speaks for himself.  
the words are all his own.

**Notice** he is hungry  
Actually hungry, for the basics  
food for his baby and himself

**Notice** his resilience  
his love for his baby  
his attachment to learning and growth  
for them both.

**Notice** the trust in telling his story

## Connected, supported, interdependent

**“It’s okay to be young and be a parent; it doesn’t mean that your life’s ended!”**

When we first talked about my having a kid young, and you told me how you admired my determination and courage, it made me feel kinda special. I don’t have many people notice that about me.

I felt really uncomfortable when I had to tell my extended family on my Dad’s side, my Aunties and Uncles, I was pregnant. They got out of the Samoan culture and were brought up in New Zealand, because they didn’t like the ways over there. Live out in Kohi. Started from the bottom and worked their way up... Yeah, they don’t like how the other half lives!

I was really upset knowing I had to face them and tell them. My Dad was great though. He said, “Melody, don’t worry, you know I’ll be there, just tell them the truth, they won’t say anything, it will be fine.”

But they pitied me. They thought my life had ended, I was having a baby, and I couldn’t carry on my education. I don’t think I’m as close to my cousins now as I used to be, I see myself as quite different. They’re quite judgmental. They live in a posh area and want their kids to go to really good schools and become a doctor or a lawyer. Where’s I’m not like that, and my parents aren’t quite like that either.

But I had to tell them the truth. Then they wanted to meet the Dad of the baby. So I started bringing him around to family functions. He comes from a really poor background and he’s not educated. I think they were quite shocked. ‘Oh, Melody gone for a guy like that’, kind of thing. But, I mean, you can’t help who you fall in love with!

My Mum though, she was my best friend. Before I had a baby I would never go out shopping or anything like that with my Mum. I hid a lot. My boyfriend, my friends, the life I was living. I was ashamed my parents would find out, and judge me. I don’t know, I just felt I had to hide things. I had no idea where I was going. I had no goals, didn’t know what my passion was. I was floating – taking each day as it came.

The whole labour and birth experience was really scary for my Dad. I remember I was about eight and a half centimetres and in quite a bit of pain... I looked at my Dad’s face... he was grey and there were tears in his eyes. I’m saying, “I think we need to call the midwife.” Mum’s in the background flitting around... “No, no not yet she’s just getting started”. And I’m walking around and I can feel the head. My sister starts insisting, “Mum you really need to call the midwife!”

I think it was quite exciting for Mum, but Dad did it hard. I’ve always been my Dad’s little girl. We have that bond. He knows if something’s wrong, he can see it or feel it, and he won’t brush it off. When it’s just me and him he’ll ask, “You weren’t happy that day, what happened?” But I was in pain and he couldn’t help me.

After Thomas was born I was really, really shy. I didn’t want to go out. I’d rather stay home. I felt horrible pushing this big pram; I wanted it to be invisible. Everyone was looking at me, judging me, making me feel uncomfortable. But my Mum was there. She could see how I was feeling, she never really talked to me about it, but she was there. A really big support, helping me, encouraging me.



We would go out together, and Mum would help push the pram. Little steps at a time... going up the road, going to the supermarket, before going out to the big mall with other mums.

The relationship between me and my parents is really strong. That started from them being there for me. And I've matured so much from being a mum too. Our relationship is much stronger and we communicate a lot better now, which is nice.

It's awesome to have friends as well. I met Zoey at antenatal class, Anne-Marie at Glassons. She saw I was pregnant too and just said 'Hi.' It's such a good connection, our kids are growing up together, and our friendship will last forever.

After our babies were born, Zoey texted me, organising a coffee group. I probably wouldn't have gone if I was by myself, but Anne-Marie had just had Luca so she came along with me. It was awesome, I'm so glad I went. I found so much in myself from going to that group, and then going on to the young mums groups at the Auckland Women's Centre. That's when it really started to happen. I was sorta finding myself.

Seeing other young mums in my situation – they had more confidence than I did. Seeing them be confident, made me think, 'I can be like that!' Feeling confident being a mum. That it's okay not to care so much what other people think of me being a young mum. Breastfeeding in public - Yeah! Standing up for myself. If my baby's hungry I'm just going to sit here in the food hall, and I'm going to feed my baby. I don't care if people are looking. And Anne-Marie was very much like that as well.

When I first came to THRIVE at the Women's Centre, you guys, like you, and Heather and Gaby and Zee, you have this passion for young people. You were so non-judgmental and really friendly, and didn't give us funny looks. You all looked at us the same, and treated us the same, and made us feel so welcome. I just loved that. It's why we kept coming back you know. There was food and transport to get there, just everything put together, a really nice space to be in.

My baby's Dad, my partner, was in prison from when Thomas was about four or five weeks old. He got out when Thomas was one and a half, so there was a big gap when I was on my own.

I was on my own, but not alone. I was really lucky to have my parents support me, and to have other people, friends, you guys, and all the learning at THRIVE. So that when Thomas was about one and a half, and his Dad stepped back into our lives, I already had my confidence built up. I was prepared for, you know, living in my own house, being domesticated, having to cook my own meals and deal with a child and a partner.

It was really, really hard for my parents. We kinda broke away and became our own little family. Mum and Dad had been there all that time, they loved Thomas, they'd lived with him from the beginning, and that was their life. My Dad knew especially though when to back off, but he had to tell my Mum sometimes, "They're their own family now."

I did feel sad, because I knew what they were thinking. I knew it was hard for them me breaking away and moving out. But it was the right time. If we'd moved out when Thomas was really young that would have been really hard.

Thomas is almost three now. I've loved the whole experience of having my own place. I've had my ups and downs with my partner and our relationship. As you know last year was a pretty hard year. Me and my partner are slowly working things out. That was quite a big brick in my way last year. We had a really rough time. I was stressed getting into my study and work; I hadn't been in the workforce for about two years. Being a stay-at-home mum to back into the workforce was quite hard, and yeah, then the big breakdown in our relationship.

But getting that first part of my study out of the way and passing. I feel a lot better now. I've got an opportunity and I don't want to lose it! I'm really getting established in my job, being an antenatal coordinator, knowing what I'm doing and where I'm going to be, it's made things so much easier. Yeah! This year's looking a lot more clearer. It looks good. I really want to achieve my goals, to finish my Diploma studies, to get out there working with young pregnant girls, get my classes going at the new centre, and then do midwifery when Thomas is older.

I love pregnancy, I love new born babies. There must be a new born baby across the road, I heard it screaming last night and I just wanted to go over there and help. 'Oh you poor thing' I really wanted to help. Especially with young inexperienced first time mums... like I had, support, advice, someone to listen, someone who understands.

It's okay to be young and be a parent; it doesn't mean your life's ended. You know it's just the beginning of a different life. For me it was for the better. People would tell me once I got pregnant, "Your life's ended, you can't get an education blah, blah, blah..." I don't see it like that at all. It's okay to be young and have a child.

I love being a mum and I love working with people like me, with young people. I've discovered myself and I'm doing something with my life. So I am in study, I am working and I'm being a mum with a toddler, and that makes me feel good!



### **Being in Relationship: Noticing the Difference that Makes the Difference to Achieving Effective Outcomes**

**Notice** the whole system of relationships, the depth and breadth of responsive-relational connections that surround and support Melody. Notice how she describes the flexible and responsive ways her parents, her friends, and THRIVE staff encourage her, and enable her growing confidence. Sometimes holding her close and firm, sometimes creating space, allowing her to stretch and grow.

**Notice** the whole person. If we only define by a statistic, or set of circumstances, we miss the person, we miss Melody. Notice her reflections on her relationships, her sense of excitement that she is 'finding herself' and her future through parenting.

**Notice** how Melody knows the difference that makes the difference. Because she has experienced, and is contributing to, an interconnected relational web of learning and support, she knows what it takes to thrive.





## **In relationship – on reflection**

### **How do you/will you invest time to see, think and do complexity and interconnection?**

I like how you have used the stories to tell a different part of the meaning of 'relationship'.

I see that in "Doing what it takes" you reflect on authenticity or honesty in the relationship as well as the need for flexibility and time. In "Stepping it up" you are reflecting on the importance of 'trust' in the relationship. In "Connected, supported and interdependent" you are reflecting on the 'holding' needed. Together they make a whole.

I had to think on this to get to this understanding though. When I think about the various audiences for this resource, being able to connect these aspects of relationship and make them clear is important.

I was thinking about our reflections on the various groups we have been in contact with, and how often in this contact we end up talking past each other. Thinking that the other has a similar understanding, but discovering that this is not so. When the 'depth' of what family whānau centred relationship means to us is so familiar, it is easy to forget that others may not have this same awareness or understanding.

**Michelle Ball**

# in and on reflection

he toa takitini.

ari he toa takitini.

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ini.

## Back to the future...

How do you spread what works? How do you convert the innovative exception into the prevailing rule?

In complicated interactions between human beings involving teaching and learning, growth and development, pain and suffering, life and death, you cannot simply clone good ideas. You cannot find out what works to improve lives and build communities as though operating in a laboratory (Schorr 1997, p.24).

The point of difference in our action inquiry is we didn't aim to learn about what works to improve family whānau lives 'as though operating in a laboratory.' We sought to learn in relationship over time. We were welcomed into relationship with key people in a number of exemplary organisations in much the same way as they welcome the families whānau with whom they work. That is, with open hearts and minds and a willingness to persevere with respect and acceptance, when things get difficult, as they almost inevitably do in the 'complicated interactions between human beings,' Lisbeth Schorr alludes to above.

Sharing our various knowledges and ways of knowing, we learned together. We learned that models, programmes and best practices are not necessarily 'the' answer. We learned there are often no easy answers. That context, contingencies and the messiness of real life cannot be planned and accounted for, even most of the time. However, in relationship we learned, "that, whether or not there are answers, the value of being with people should not be underestimated" (Davis & Day 2010, p.145).

'Suffering is not a question that demands an answer;  
it is not a problem that demands a solution;  
it is a mystery that demands a presence.'  
(Unknown author, cited in Davis & Day 2010, p.144).

In the absence of ready strategies and solutions, we learned that walking alongside talking about, exploring, working on, and through, difficulties together, doing 'what it takes' at the time, and over time, works. We found this way of working has an exponential effect. Staff stay in exemplary organisations turnover is minimal. And similarly, many families whānau stay connected to exemplary organisations (as you do in healthy relationships), finding creative ways, appropriate to their circumstances and abilities, for giving back. Some have called this form of reciprocity, "the circle of contribution" (Potts 2010, p.128), other's call it common sense. Remember the words of the Te Waipuna Puawai Manukura ... "*We create together, with the people, enhancing all of our lives.*"

We've called this approach 'innovative', and we've learned innovation is not always about the 'new.' Indeed perhaps one of the most striking realisations of working with exemplary organisations over time, may be, that in different ways, these organisations are reconnecting with principles and practices (wisdoms) that are in fact very old (Chatterjee 2006).

Practices like conversation as core process. We used intentional conversation in this action inquiry, as the organisations we worked with do with families whānau, because:

Since our earliest ancestors gathered in circles around the warmth of a fire, talking together has been our primary means for discovering common interests, sharing knowledge, imagining the future and cooperating to survive and thrive (Hurley & Brown 2009, p.3).

Practices like authentic collaboration, because we recognise "reality is relational" (Chatterjee 2006, p.153) and effective social innovation is about inclusion and connectedness. Moreover, even a cursory



scan of the conversations occurring in a wide range of literatures would suggest a connected relational approach, that recognises we are all ‘in it together,’ is an idea whose time has come.

In England, Australia, Denmark, the USA, Canada, and in many contexts here in Aotearoa New Zealand, people from all walks are talking about conversations and relationships, and beginning to action, better ways of working together for better outcomes. Amongst many examples there are, ‘good conversations’ (IPPR North and Social Regeneration Consultants 2010), ‘community conversations’ (Block 2008; Born 2008; Inspiring Communities 2010; McKnight & Block 2010), and ‘citizen-centred’ conversations about collaborative public service design (Bradwell & Marr 2008; Gillinson & McEaney 2011; Craig, Horne, & Mongon 2009; Gibson 2006; Parker & O’Leary 2006). All are premised - from the service interface, to the boardroom, to the systems of government - on the significance of more equal, more inclusive, and more respectful human conversations and relationships.

In this action inquiry, we used authentic collaboration, a way of working together premised on respectful, more equal relationships and good conversations. We found that this way of working in itself is a breakthrough; one that creates and sustains the conditions for real, ongoing, and lasting change.

As our work together cycled through repeated phases of action and reflection, we paid attention to the characteristics, practices and language of a family whānau centred approach premised on authentic collaboration. Our intention was not only to learn more about, and document the effects of this approach in situ, but also to discern its points of difference from the characteristics, practices and language that inform more established thinking and practice. The table overleaf presents some of the key differences we noticed. It is offered as a ‘thought starter’ – a call to pay attention to the power of our constructs and the language we use, and to be mindful that our vocabularies are premised on particular values and beliefs. In paying attention over time, we recognised that a family whānau centred approach uses a different vocabulary, one that languages more inclusive, more robust, values, measures and accountabilities.

The organisations and practitioners at the forefront of this approach all hold and enact variations on three universal values: “respect or caring, generosity or justice, and service to others” (Labonte 1997,p.40). These timeless values are also linked to individual and community well-being (Labonte 1997; Ornstein & Sobel 1999).

For example, at Te Waipuna Puawai, the organisation’s values...

Te tapu o te tangata	≈	Respect
Aroha	≈	Compassion
Tika	≈	Justice
Manaakitanga	≈	Hospitality

...are woven into every facet of everything, everyday. In policy, practice, accountability, strategy, funding and so on, these living values inform every relationship and every decision staff, managers, and the Board make. They are the “cultural cornerstones” (Lencioni 2002) that guide action and reflection throughout the organisation.



Authentic Collaboration	Current 'norms' and practices
<p><b>Power-With</b></p> <p>Recognition and pooling of different abilities and a willingness to work and learn together.</p>	<p><b>Power-Over</b></p> <p>Recognition and privileging of 'professional' and 'expert' knowledge, practice and status.</p>
<p><b>Engagement</b></p> <p>Power-with enables a call to engage with people in respectful relationships.</p> <p>Early Engagement.</p>	<p><b>Intervention</b></p> <p>Power-over creates the right to do 'to' people; to intervene in the lives of 'others.'</p> <p>Early Intervention.</p>
<p><b>Relational Approach to Service that Connects</b></p> <p>Uses language that recognises we are 'in it together.'</p> <p>Services speak of... Family whānau in the collective and peoples' names are known and used.</p> <p>Introduction.</p>	<p><b>Transactional Approach to Service that Separates</b></p> <p>Uses language that creates categories and divides people into 'them and us' distinctions.</p> <p>Services speak about... Customers, clients, consumers and service users.</p> <p>Referral.</p>
<p><b>Listening and Co-producing</b></p> <p>Recognition and inclusion of different abilities and a diverse range of 'expertise'. Having intentional conversations with people concerned about what is important to them in their lives and co-producing effective respectful family whānau centred services.</p>	<p><b>Consulting</b></p> <p>Privileges 'professional' and 'expert' knowledge in developing a service or policy. Then 'consults' 'customers' or representatives of the target group or population to create changes.</p>
<p><b>Over time – Long Term Focus - Time as Investment</b></p> <p>Invests time to build and maintain positive, reflective relationships characterised by depth and reciprocity.</p> <p>A purposeful and outcome-focused cycle of contribution that aims to create genuine and lasting improvements for everyone involved.</p>	<p><b>In time – Short Term Focus - Time as Cost and Risk</b></p> <p>Time generally framed as cost and risk to be mitigated.</p> <p>More focus on outputs and throughputs than recognising that negotiating genuine outcomes to create lasting improvements takes time, and pays exponential dividends.</p>

Authentic Collaboration	Current 'norms' and practices
<p><b>Multiple, Layered and Relationally Accountable</b></p> <p>Genuinely and innovatively accountable to all involved. To family whānau, to organisation staff, to organisation partners, to communities, to funding agencies.</p> <p>Recognises and respects the actual experiences of family whānau - what works and what doesn't work – to improve and transform peoples' lives. Innovates to 'measure' the actual service experiences of people, how they feel and what they value.</p>	<p><b>Single Accountability</b></p> <p>Accountability framework generally privileges programme and/or system-level criteria (such as progress against targets) set by funding agency or body.</p>
<p><b>Principles of Practice</b></p> <p>An adaptable approach that provides guidance and allows for variations of context, situation and circumstance.</p> <p>Recipe Metaphor "Season to taste" = effective guidance principle (Patton, 2011, p. 167)</p>	<p><b>'Best' Practice</b></p> <p>More prescriptive and programmatic. Aims to roll-out specific programmes, or models, that have shown success in one situation into different localities with limited flexibility to allow for local contexts, needs and adaptations.</p> <p>Recipe Metaphor "Add a teaspoon of salt" = best practice prescription (Patton, 2011 p.167)</p>
<p><b>Strengths-Based</b></p> <p>A family whānau centred approach that aims to grow with people to interdependence.</p> <p>Family whānau are regarded as capable of shaping and contributing to the running of the services they use. Seen as...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Capable, resourceful, competent</li> <li>▪ Who may have some dysfunctional strategies</li> <li>▪ Who may encounter problems or experience vulnerability at certain times across a life cycle</li> </ul> <p>Staff see family whānau suffering rather than pathology.</p>	<p><b>Problem-Centred</b></p> <p>A deficit approach, that aims to 'fix' people to independence.</p> <p>Whole categories of people are problematised as being...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dysfunctional</li> <li>▪ At risk</li> <li>▪ Vulnerable</li> </ul>

Exemplary organisations also measure different things. Taking a holistic ‘and-and’ approach they use qualitative and quantitative measures, utilising each in appropriate fit-for-purpose ways. Nevertheless, there is critique of the greater emphasis external funders (including government agencies) place on system targets and efficiency numerics (colloquially called ‘tick box outputs’). As one senior manager commented, “When you see the variations in how different agencies report on their contracts in order to meet their outputs you begin to think about the anomalies. And how does ticking a box to say you visited a home ‘x’ number of times show improved outcomes for this child, or this family?”

Exemplary organisations have greater respect for the actual experiences of people, and a willingness to innovate in ‘measuring’ those experiences, because they understand that:

People in all their complexity and unpredictability, can never be reduced to data. Successful service organisations keep a steady focus on experience – as a means of guarding against the temptation to put people into boxes or reduce them to a spreadsheet (Parker & Heapy 2006, p.20).

The young parents’ stories at the heart of this resource undeniably prove this point. Their stories represent the ‘measurement’ of success from an experiential and relational perspective. That is, from the vantage point of the young parents who are accessing the services and support, and learning and growing in relationship with staff. In a family whānau centred approach this experiential and relational information matters the most. Staff know that unless they understand what the services and support they offer looks like, feels like, and works like for the families whānau they work with, they have little hope of building relationships and embarking together on successful learning journeys towards improved outcomes.

In this resource we have (re)told three young parents’ stories. These recollections and reflections provide not only a glimpse, but also a narrative of their lives in time. In reality and in relationship with staff in exemplary organisations, these young parents, and other families whānau, are sharing their insights, experiences and challenges in conversation. In the dynamic ebb and flow of responsive-relational practice, conversation is the core process for assessing what’s working and what’s not. For understanding how people feel, for sharing the successes and the challenges, and importantly, within the webs and interconnections of a whole systems approach, for determining both family whānau and organisational priorities and outcomes.

Remember one of my first conversations with Annalise Myers. “We’re not about keeping on delivering what we’ve been doing for awhile, she told me. “We’re about listening to young people; we’re about growing and moving as needs change and issues arise.”

Those at the forefront are taking down the walls, thinking afresh and taking a broader relational view. Working empathically ‘up close and personal’ with deep understandings of, and long-term commitments, not only to the families whānau at the centre of their practice, but also to the organisational colleagues they work alongside. Robust, layered accountabilities extend further than this though. Recognising the ‘bigger picture,’ and that processes and outcomes are inextricably interlinked, exemplary organisations work collectively in relationship with, and accountable to, other services, the communities they work within, and the various funders who invest in and support their work.

## Concluding connections and reflections...

Geoff Mulgan, until of late the Chief Executive of the Young Foundation,<sup>14</sup> recently put forward a vision for a relational state. That is, government in all its many shapes and guises that does things with people. He asked...

So where should we look for the green shoots of the relational state, for the practice which points the way to the future? What new skills, styles and structures will come to predominate? Will public agencies need to recruit different kinds of people, prioritising social intelligence relative to analytical intelligence; story-tellers relative to number crunchers; empathisers relative to economists? All of these developments... could be logical ones, natural aspects of democracy turning from being government for the people to government with the people (Mulgan 2010, p.6).

I would suggest looking to the third sector. For the practices that 'point the way to the future' are to be found thriving within exemplary family whānau centred organisations.

And here at an important waypoint in this learning journey, I consciously revert to 'I' – circling back to the beginning of relationships that have irrevocably changed me. What is it, Michael Poutiantine (2009) says, about transformational change? Ah yes... "It is irreversible" (p.192).

In the course of this action inquiry I had the privilege to sit amongst a large crowd gathered in a school auditorium and listen to keynote addresses from two American professors, Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and David Stovall, who teach and research effective teaching practices in urban schools. Called, 'Social Justice Education: Engaging Youth and Community,' this was no ordinary symposium. Held at Kia Aroha College in Ōtara, Auckland, this was no ordinary school. Jeff and Dave spoke passionately about their experiences of working with young people, schools and communities, and raised intensely personal questions, asking us to reflect where we, as individuals, fit into the relations of power in our societies. At the conclusion, a kuia stood, and asked both men,

"What part does love play in your work?"

"It's everything," Jeff replied.

For almost two years I have worked with people (leaders, managers, community development practitioners, frontline staff and members of families whānau), who would answer the question just as Jeff did.

Their approach is 'hope-full', full of hope; it's 'power-full', full of shared power and knowledge, where everyone has a stake and a voice. It's professional, it's personal and it's inclusive – it's about all of us, in it together. Most importantly it's effective. It works because as Puamiria Maaka said at the beginning of this action inquiry journey, "Lasting outcomes won't be achieved any other way; if the approach is not family whānau centred, then who is being served?"

Who indeed? And so the last words in this journey must belong to family whānau. To a young dad, who when asked, "What's most important to you when walking into a support service?" stood in front of a range of professionals – funders, planners, architects, service managers - and a number of his peers, and replied confidently,

"I want to feel the aroha, I want to feel the love."

<sup>14</sup> The Young Foundation in Britain is an institution with a track record of over 50 years success bringing together insights, innovation and entrepreneurship to meet social needs. See: [www.youngfoundation.org](http://www.youngfoundation.org)



**We don't care what you know,  
unless we know  
that you care"<sup>15</sup>**





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## A summary of previous 'Innovative Practice' work in the Families Commission

For a number of years the Families Commission has supported studies from independent researchers on new ways to improve the effectiveness of family services. On the 7 May 2009 the Commission hosted a workshop called 'Innovative Practice in Family Services' that brought together six services supported by the Commission to explore their innovative practices and share their findings more widely.

- Te Aroha Noa Community Services, Highbury, Palmerston North.
- SECPHO South East and City Primary Health Organisation, Newtown, Wellington.
- Victory Primary School and Victory Community Health Centre, Nelson.
- School Connections Programme, Presbyterian Support Upper South Island.
- Kia Whakakotahi, the Taita College Project.
- Focusing on Families – Family Inclusion in Mental Health Services, Nelson Marlborough District Health Board.

Eight characteristics of innovative practice in family services emerged from this workshop. These were subsequently worked into an '**Eight plus Eight**' framework that informed the beginning of the action inquiry journey recounted in this resource.

1. **Family and community centred**—Families and communities were at the centre, not the systems or programmes on offer. Services took 'whole family' approaches, looking beyond presenting problems and individual circumstances. Services recognised the importance and potential of seeing families in a wider ecological context. Services invested in understanding their community and seeing opportunities.
2. **Relationships**—Relationships were fundamental to the way these services worked with families and other providers and communities. The quality of the relationship was inseparable from the task at hand. Relationships allowed the services to be adaptive because they were much more aware of family and community strengths and needs. Solid relationships also suited the often long term focus of these participants. Three specific elements of relationships were commonly mentioned – trust, respect and listening.
3. **Intensive commitment**—In striving to do more for families and communities, services showed the following characteristics: taking time, being preventative, courage, honesty, listening, intimacy, immersion and warmth. Services were in it for the 'long haul' with individual families and communities as a whole. Services saw their work as intensively investing in people through a preventative approach, rather than fixing problems later.
4. **Leadership**—Services saw themselves as centres for families and communities. This included being a broker between families and services and as a conduit for the physical integration of services. Family and community needs were matched with resources and opportunities and services focused on this coordinating and value adding role rather than necessarily taking on a service delivery role themselves.

5. **Strengths based**–Services saw families and communities as holding the capabilities to lead their own change. Services were there to assist families and communities to recognise and activate these capabilities. Interventions should be focused on building on families’ strengths and aspirations rather than focusing exclusively on fixing problems. These services leveraged community resources, skills and experience by investing in relationships with community leaders and brokers. Finding out what communities and families actually wanted, and being led by these discoveries was a common strategy.
6. **Flexibility and creativity**–Services embraced the uncertainty and complexity by choosing to be led by family and community aspirations and needs. Services adapted as family and community needs and aspirations evolved. Being flexible sometimes meant starting slowly, testing and refining, and being continually sensitive to change and opportunities rather than becoming fixed into a set approach or programme. Creativity included thinking outside the box, risk-taking and learning from failure, having the courage to change what was not effective, valuing recreational activities as opportunities to start family and community change, embracing uncertainty, and finding opportunity in chaos.
7. **Hope-full** (ie full of hope)–Services were working with families and communities for whom many interventions had not worked. There was a driving optimism and commitment to change entrenched patterns of poor outcomes and old ways of understanding and addressing needs. This sometimes involved working at multiple levels and across different agencies to promote a stronger environment for families and communities.
8. **Way of being**–Services noted that that their approach intuitively felt right. They had a guiding vision which had real currency. Services had experienced major changes in practice in response to seeing that existing ways of working were not effective. Reflection was common including critical analysis of what was and was not working. Walking the talk was important – organisational relationships operated by the same principles as those with families and communities.

## Eight Elements of Organisational Sustainability

### Adapted from Michael Fullan's (2005) Frameworks for Implementing Systemic and Sustainable Organisational Change<sup>16</sup>

- 1. Family-centred services with a moral purpose**  
 Purpose that must transcend individuals to become a system and organization quality in which collectivities are committed to:

  - Raising the bar and working effectively to provide improved family-centred services and outcomes.
  - Treating people with demanding respect (moral purpose is supportive, responsive and demanding depending on the circumstances).
  - Altering the social environment for the better.
- 2. Commitment to changing to a family-centred context at all levels**  
 Changing whole systems means changing the entire context within which people work.
- 3. Lateral capacity building through networks**  
 Developing new network strategies and relationships across all levels of the system.
- 4. Intelligent accountability and vertical relationships (capacity building and accountability)**  
 Requires both local ownership and external accountability in the entire system. An accountability framework, which puts a premium on ensuring effective and ongoing self-evaluation in every facet of an organisation's work combined with more focused external accountability and feedback loops linked closely to effective improvements for families (this means family voices are at the centre of service/ programme evaluations).
- 5. Deep learning**  
 Trusting and collaborative learning cultures of inquiry that enable deep and consequential changes in organisational practices. A culture which encourages innovation and risk taking, in which failure is given a different meaning as a necessary element in making progress.
- 6. Dual commitment to short-term and long-term results**  
 Achieving tangible results in a timely way, while maintaining a focus on, and building commitment to long-term goals.
- 7. Cyclical energising**  
 Cycles of push and recovery and the ability to work effectively without burning out. Must be a capacity of both the individual and the system.
- 8. The long lever of leadership**

  - Strategic leadership
  - Content and process leadership
  - Joined-up and distributed leadership
  - 'Leaderful' (Raelin, 2003) practice to build individual, interpersonal and organisational capacities and learning communities, (Concurrent, Collective, Collaborative and Compassionate practice)

<sup>16</sup> Full explanations and examples of these constructs in action can be found in Fullan (2005), *Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action*, Corwin Press. See Also Raelin, J (2003) *Creating Leaderful Organisations*, Berrett-Koeler Publishers



## Families Panels – An Overview

The Families Commission set up Families Panel Discussion Groups to keep in touch with the views of families. Each Families Panel group includes eight to twelve participants in similar circumstances. The group meets three times a year for two years.

The Panels are designed to generate in-depth, reflective dialogue based on the experience of the participants. Each time they meet there is a theme, often a topic of current interest to the Commission. However, a key purpose for the Panels is to enable the Commission to hear from families about emerging issues and concerns.

The original four discussion groups were established in early 2008 and were based in the wider Auckland Northland area. These groups comprised teenage parents, Pacific Island families, 'mortgage belt' families, and a group of rural families in Dargaville.

There are currently 12 discussion groups across the country. Each coordinated by a local community organisation selected for their ability to connect with local families whānau. The current makeup of Families Panels is Māori whānau (two groups), sole parents, parents of teenagers, rural families in Central Otago, parents of young children, Pacific Island families, Chinese migrant families, Somali refugee families, urban middle New Zealand families, teen fathers, and families that include parents with a disability.



*Reinvention  
is not changing what is  
but creating what isn't*

*A butterfly is not an improved caterpillar  
it is a different creature*

*-Tracey Goss*



