Importance of collaboration among parents,
early years professionals and communities


Discussion paper for Goodstart


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# Introduction

Over the past decades, research on parent/early years professionals collaboration has shown that when communities, parents and teachers work together as partners with shared, meaningful, educational aims in mind, the potential for improving children's learning outcomes is enhanced. In some intervention studies, partnerships between professionals and parents focused on specific learning outcomes have shown benefits of collaboration for children's learning (e.g., see studies reviewed in this paper in relation to literacies; studies in Epstein & Sheldon, 2006, reporting on a range of outcomes asociated with parent/professionals' collaboration). The EPPE study found that the quality of the home learning environment (where parents engaged in educational activities, including, reading to children, teaching children songs and nursery rhymes, playing with letters and numbers, painting and drawing and taking children to libraries, creating regular opportunities for play with friends) strongly promoted children's intellectual and social development (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). In combination, these findings suggest the powerful role early childhood services might play in collaborating with families in order to meet educational aims. And it is important to children that people whose opinion and love they value also value and support their learning. However, as Epstein & Sheldon (2006) note, it is often difficult to isolate effects of partnerships on outcomes from effects of other strategies to improve programmes. These authors call for research to move beyond descriptive and exploratory research to "confirmatory studies and targeted evaluations about how full programs and specific practices of school, family, and community partnerships develop and affect families and students" (p. 130).

Over time, collaboration with parents and among early childhood and school professionals is able to support a positive school transition (Mitchell et al., in press-b; Peters, 2010), and may be associated with later school achievement (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). Outcomes for families from engagement in early years settings can include social support and parent learning and development (Benseman, 2008), and reduction of stress. Such improvements in parents' lives may in turn contribute to child outcomes. Outcomes for families have been found in playgroups (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2014; Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara, & Wylie, 2008; Needham & Jackson, 2014) and in multi-service or integrated early years settings where early years education is a main focus and multiple services for family and children are available and constructed with that community (Clarkin-Phillips & Carr, 2009; McDonald, O'Byrne. & Prichard, 2015). Integrated service provision is widely regarded as a way to support family needs in a holistic way and in particular to address needs of disadvantaged families (Wong & Press, 2012). Integrated centres recognise the impact of family and community contexts on children's learning and development and focus on improving outcomes for children, families and community.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development offers a theoretical rationale for teachers and parents working in close collaboration and impacts of these. Bronfenbrenner suggested that the "developmental potential" of a child's participation in two or more settings is enhanced when there is consensus about goals, and supportive linkages between the settings. Epstein and Sheldon (2006) conceptualise partnerships as a "theory of overlapping spheres of interest" which "posits that students learn more when parents, educators, and others in the community work together to guide and support student learning and development" (p. 118).

Concepts of funds of knowledge and cultural capital are relevant. The underlying premise of a 'funds of knowledge' approach to theorising families, communities and early childhood settings is that 'people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge' (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, pp.ix-x). In New Zealand, the Te Kotahitanga project (Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter, & Clapham, 2012), aimed at improving *Māor*i (indigenous people of New Zealand) educational achievement, demonstrates the need for teachers to recognise and incorporate differing cultural knowledges within the curriculum, to address structural imbalances in power, but most important for teachers to position themselves in ways that remove deficit thinking (about students, families, schools, the education system and society) and enable them 'to offer solutions instead of reinforcing problems and barriers' (Bishop, 2010, p. 69). In Australia, Miller and Petriwskyj (Miller & Petriwskyj, 2013) have argued for 'deep engagement with diverse cultures and worldviews to enrich children and the society' and to 'challenge stereotypes and racism to develop more inclusive

behaviours' (p. 253). This is important in repositioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as First Australians, and in attending to cultural and linguistic diversity. Many other writers (Gundara & Portera, 2008; Guo, 2012; Portera, 2008) have argued that deficit assumptions about students from minority groups need to be challenged in pedagogical practice.

Bourdieu refers to cultural capital as forms of knowledge, and skills and ways of being and behaving that confer status and privilege in society (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 48). Cultural capital draws on previous generations' funds of knowledge and understandings of the world that include language, activities, significant customs and cultural nuances, practices and expectations (Sullivan, 2001). This knowledge is both indirectly and directly passed down to successive generations through interactions within children's home life and their community. Providing culturally compatible cross links between the child's microsystems of home and educational setting is regarded as a way to optimise the learning and development of children.

## Background

In this section we examine findings from selected studies of community, family and professional collaboration in three focus areas that are of key relevance and pose particular challenges to early years settings today. These are collaboration with respect to the following topics:

- family literacies;
- curriculum and assessment;
- communities experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage.

Within each topic we pay particular attention to collaborative approaches with indigenous communities and culturally diverse communities.

For each topic we summarise relevant studies, chosen because they illuminate collaborative approaches and challenges well. Studies are recent and most are from Australia, New Zealand and Canada on the grounds that these countries have parallels in histories of colonisation and in sharing a mixed market of provision making lessons relevant to Goodstart. For each topic we examine the structures, processes and outcomes of collaboration. In the first topic (family literacies) structures, processes and outcomes frame the presentation of the information. These aspects are presented at the end of each of the other two topics. A final section draws together the main lessons from each of the topic areas to highlight broad principles of productive collaboration, examine measurement issues and suggest potential directions for Goodstart.

### Family literacies

'Family literacies' refers to the many ways families use literacy in the activities and interactions of daily family and community life (Brookes, Pahl, Pollard & Rees, 2008; Cairney, 2008; Pahl, 2002). 'Literacies' include multiple languages and 'subcultural languages' (multiple text forms) and multiple text modes such as graphics and sounds (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Jewitt & Kress, 2003). A broad and inclusive construct, family literacies include the literacies of educational and other institutional settings where families engage such as medical or welfare services, those of the community more broadly such as church groups or sports teams, and those found in the home such as paying bills or reading to children. It includes the movement of literacies from the home out into the community and back again (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

A New Zealand study (Furness, 2012, 2013) explored four family literacy programmes in community and school settings. The children in the 19 families in the study ranged from pre-school to school-age. The families were predominantly Māori and *Pasifika* (people from Pacific islands who had settled in New Zealand or their descendants). The programmes were family oriented, organised efforts to increase adults and children's literacy abilities and learning (Hannon, 2000). The researcher was interested in

the contribution that participation in these programmes made to the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities.

A wellbeing framework developed by community psychologists Geoffrey Nelson and Isaac Prilleltenksy was used to understand programme structures, processes and outcomes (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). This systems-based framework has its roots in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory, developed in relation to current social conditions and explicit concern for cultural and social justice. Its strength lies in its ability to readily accommodate differing culturally based perspectives, including those of indigenous peoples (Durie, 1998, 2006), on what wellbeing is and what is needed to achieve it. It is important at a societal level because it brings together the need for individual wellbeing at the same time as collective needs (for example families, communities) are taken into account. And, it emphasises the centrality of relational wellbeing—respectful and transformative relationships—that contributes to and ensures individual wellbeing and the wellbeing of the groups to which individuals belong, and to which personal wellbeing is inexorably connected (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). This is a more holistic, integrative view of wellbeing compared to the more individual-focused view usually associated with Western models (Bornstein, Davidson, Keyes & Moore, 2003; Durie, 1998; Mulitalo-Lauta, 2001).

The study found that the four programmes were underpinned by values and beliefs held strongly by the educational leaders and teachers (the educators) in the settings and which were common across the programmes. The educators believed that the dominant literacy (in the case of New Zealand and other similar nations, English language text-based reading, writing, speaking and listening) is necessary for full participation in society where it predominates. They also believed that there are other equally important literacies. For example, for Māori literacy means bi-literacy—literacy in the English and Māori languages. It also includes such practices and abilities as 'reading' tribally significant land features as well as artefacts such as *tukutuku* (woven panels) and their location on *marae* (Māori community gathering places) (Māori Adult Literacy Working Party, 2001). They saw literacy as partly technical skills and partly individual (cognitive) activity, but saw these elements as inseparable from literacy's social and relational contexts of use. This view reflected Gee's (2008) view of literacy as socialization into particular 'ways of being' or being 'particular kinds of people'. The educators encouraged the parents and caregivers (parents) to take a critical, questioning approach to texts. This was related to the educators' belief in basic human rights, in particular people's right to know, to participate and to have a say.

The parents were seen as already skilled in many ways. Their literacy needs or 'gaps' were seen as gaps in relation to particular objectives or purposes rather than as the basis for defining them. They were viewed as multi-faceted, with many aspects to their often very busy or complex lives. The educators recognized that some people had multiple problems with which they had to deal. People were seen as cultural beings, with differing values, beliefs and 'ways of being', connected to their identities, the diversity of which were acknowledged and respected. The educators strongly believed children needed to be supported by adults in relational and practical ways and that parenting was critically important in this. They believed that all parents care about their children but that, for various reasons, some children were not getting enough of some of the important things they needed to flourish. They saw that the parents and caregivers were also people in their own right, with interests, concerns and aspirations additional to parenting, and that all people had needs as human beings.

The beliefs and values which underpinned the programme were summarised as *respect* for participants as capable adults and people with potential, for different 'ways of being' (Gee, 2008) and for the complexity of people's lives; *trust* in people's abilities and capacities; and belief in the *rights* of all people to have a say in the things that affect them and to participate in their families, communities and society as they wish, to have fair access to society's resources, and to have reasonable quality of life within the capacity of the nation to provide it (Furness, 2012). These beliefs and values shaped the processes that the educators used, providing a structure for the processes of collaboration.

## Processes of collaboration

The processes of collaboration involved negotiation between the educators and the parents on how the programme would be implemented whilst also achieving the programme funders' (the New Zealand Government) requirements. Meeting community needs idiosyncratically, each programme was structured differently. Involvement was negotiated to suit the parents' existing commitments and obligations which were often to the wider family or the community; for example, looking after grandparents or coaching a children's sports team. Fluctuating levels of engagement were easily accommodated in two of the programmes which enabled families to be involved over longer periods of time. Critically important was the inclusion of culturally appropriate patterns of interaction and communication between the educators and the parents. In the Māori and Pasifika communities and working with Māori and Pasifika families opportunities for relationship building and reciprocity were important, as was inclusion of *whānau* (family) and a focus on the family as the reason for the programme, *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face to face communication) between parents and educators and the use of the family's language wherever possible (Smith, 1999; Powick, 2002). In one programme for example, the educator and participants spent time in shared discussion getting to know each other, including time together over shared morning tea providing opportunity for informal conversation. This process led to understanding that while they were from different Pacific islands (Tonga, Samoa, the Cook Islands and New Zealand) and the educator was Indian, they had in common their Christianity and the importance they all placed on similar cultural-religious practices. Together they settled on saying a prayer at the start and end of each meeting matching the customary practices they shared.

## Outcomes of collaboration

Outcomes of the programme, facilitated by a respectful approach and a strengths-based view of the families, included the improvement in the literacy abilities that were the primary focus of the programme as well as other educational, social and wellbeing-related outcomes. In the absence of suitable measurement tools, outcomes were identified and categorised through analysis of interviews, triangulated through multiple perspectives: those of the adults, educators, children and other key informants such as relatives who knew the families well. Repeat interviews over 18 months enabled identification of effects over time. In one programme, in which adults implemented a children's oral language development strategy, formal school-based assessment of children's oral language and reading development was analysed (Atvars, Pinfold & Stock, 1999) [1]. New literacy knowledge included such examples as how to engage children with books and how to support children's use of the comprehension strategies they are taught at school. New everyday living knowledge and skills included such examples as time management strategies and how to access community services. Deep knowledge of the context was gained in the programmes located in schools such as school's expectations of parental involvement and high level understanding of educational processes such as scaffolding. The parents also experienced positive social and relational events and changes, affirmation and strengthening of their values and affirmation and building of positive identity, critically important to them as they developed confidence to engage in further learning, seek career paths for themselves and help in their communities. The children were receiving more learning help, support and encouragement; having more positive experiences with learning, receiving more effective support and care, and/or family relationships were more harmonious. The children had more models in their family of text users, learners and contributors and of confident, efficacious adults which boded well for their futures. Benefits were also felt in the communities where there was more help available to other parents and children; parents were sharing with other parents, extended family and other community members what they were learning about children's educational needs, how children learn and what happens in learning centres and why; and there were more models in the community of adults as life-long learners and active, participatory citizens. (Furness, 2012)

Another New Zealand study explored the structures, processes and outcomes of a family literacy programme that provided opportunities for parents to engage in literacy learning, learn about children's literacy learning, engage in other learning of interest to them (for example, towards an early years education qualification)

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1. Government-funded programmes for parents and caregivers which involve literacy are now required to report against the Literacy and Numeracy for Adults Assessment Tool (see http://www.tec.govt.nz/Resource-Centre/Software-tools/Literacy-and-Numeracy-for-Adults-Assessment-Tool/).

and organised time for children and parents to engage in learning together. (Benseman, 2008; Benseman & Sutton, 2004). This study found that parents' involvement with their children's learning centres in these formalised ways enabled them to understand more about the education system more generally, to develop confidence in their capacity to support their children's learning, to feel renewed and better informed as parents, and to see further, higher level educational possibilities for themselves which many took up.

### Indigenous communities

In New Zealand, Māori, as indigenous people's elsewhere, have expressed their viewpoints on processes that need to occur and structures that need to be in place to enable the educational and other social wellbeing outcomes that Māori expect and desire to be achieved. Desirable outcomes are centred on whānau and *iwi* (tribal) self-determination to participate fully in the world as global citizens and as Māori (Durie, 2006). Connection to land, whānau and all living things is central to Māori wellbeing. These values need to find expression in the implementation of educational policies and practices. In the programmes in Furness's (2012) study where this occurred, tangible, discernable pathways towards enhanced wellbeing for families—as they defined wellbeing—were identified. In New Zealand those of us who are *Pākeha* (non-Maori) draw on the considerable research and writing on kaupapa Māori approaches in working out how we need to work with Māori individuals, families and communities (e.g. Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Powick, 2002). This will have parallels for European Australians working in aboriginal communities (Purdie, Dudgeon, & Walker, 2010).

### Cultural diversity

Australia, like New Zealand, is increasingly multicultural. Teachers will invariably be challenged by the need to increase their knowledge and understanding of the values, beliefs and experiences of children and families different than their own. The family literacy study above identified ways educators built this knowledge. These ways included spending informal time with the parents and caregivers, welcoming in and involving the wider family in centre activities, participating in the cultural activities of the families and sharing aspects of their own lives with them (Furness, 2012). They were always respectful in their interactions.

## Curriculum and assessment

The extensive literature on formative assessment and assessment for learning has emphasised the need to consider: what outcomes are valued for 21st century learning, including cultural ideals of valued learning; the active involvement of children in their own assessment and ability to recognise their learning; and the powerful influence of assessment on children's sense of identity as a learner and motivation (Stobard, 2008). Curriculum underpins assessment and shapes learning. The importance of family expectations and family support for children's learning and development is well recognised, but it is not until recently that consideration has been given to the influence of assessment on family expectations and the role of families as both recipients of assessment information and contributors to assessment. These ideas about the more active roles that families can play in curriculum and assessment are congruent with a sociocultural and funds of knowledge framing.

In a recent literature scan, *Continuity of Early Learning: Learning Progress and Outcomes in the Early Years*, Carr, Davis and Cowie (in press) presented three debates central to analysis of assessment. These debates raise the following questions:

> Debate 1: Which educational outcomes are valued? and What educational outcomes should be assessed?

> Debate 2: Who does the assessing? and Who is it for? Within this debate "The value of, and opportunities for, including the wider community of families/whānau in assessment practices in early childhood centres and the early years of school is emphasised, as well as the value of, and opportunities for, self-assessment by learners."

We consider these debates are worthy of focus in generating understanding with professionals and families of valued outcomes, including cultural understandings, and finding ways to include the wider community and families in assessment practices. In respect to valued outcomes, Furness (2012) argues for assessment that takes into account those dimensions of learning that are associated with or contribute to wellbeing.

## Structures, processes and outcomes of collaboration

A challenge in professional/family collaboration is about coming to a shared understanding of what learning outcomes look like and how their development can be documented, understood and progressed. This challenge is especially demanding where family values and educational experiences are very different from those of professionals.

Adair and Tobin (2008) have used video recordings of a "typical day" for a 4 year-old in ECEC settings to stimulate discussion of immigrant and immigrant and non-immigrant parents, teachers and administrators and other key stakeholders of their beliefs and concerns. This was found to be a productive method for finding out different understandings. In their use of the method with Mexican parents in Solano, the researchers identified a fundamental tension: "How can they raise their children to be able to succeed and feel at home in their adopted country while retaining their heritage language and culture?" (p. 5).

In a study of teaching and learning in culturally diverse early childhood settings (Mitchell et al., 2015), teachers in one centre with predominantly Asian families consciously planned for discussions with groups of parents to talk about values – their own values as teachers and how these might meet with family values. This went wider than the common practice of asking individual parents about their child when they first enrolled. Communication about values was helped by staff able to speak the languages of families. Through these means, teachers developed understanding of areas of concern held by parents, such as expectations about readiness for school and for children to learn through structured teaching and worksheets. These teachers used a variety of verbal and written ways to explain the learning that happens through play in relation to these areas of concern. Within narrative assessments they highlighted learning areas that they knew to be of concern. They were also willing to reassess their own positions in relation to parents' views.

Another strategy was a formal review of the centre's responsiveness to language and culture carried out through a survey of parents and inviting children to draw their ideas about relationships and explain them. (How do you feel when someone speaks in their own language to you? Who do you play with? How do you feel when you meet someone who doesn't speak your language?) The review highlighted areas for them to extend. The teachers decided to be more intentional about incorporating stories and songs from different cultures into large group experiences and to include more Māori stories and traditional tales. They resolved also to prepare a booklet for parents of bilingual learners that examines some of the issues parents have concerns about (e.g., mixing of languages) and what research says about this.

At a community level, the First Nations Partnership Programme with the University of Victoria, Canada, involved a community-based delivery of a bicultural (Indigenous and Euro-western), university-accredited diploma program in child and youth care. First Nations elders, instructors and community resource people from seven First Nations community groups met weekly with University of Victoria students to discuss and model traditional customs, language, and values related to children's stages of development. Theoretical and curriculum approaches in mainstream early childhood settings were examined at the same time. All seven partnerships consciously focused on strengths rather than deficits. These processes of engagement enabled the co-construction of goals, programme development and assessment. A two year evaluation concluded that the model enabled the development of a culturally specific alternative to prevailing 'pan indigenous' training programs and cultural 'add-ons' to

mainstream curricula (Ball, Pence, & Victoria: First Nations Partnership Programs, 2001; and for more information on First Nations Partnership Programs, see www.fnpp.org).

Similarly, in New Zealand, iwi have worked with teachers within the framework of the New Zealand national curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, to develop their own curriculum linked to *tīpuna* (ancestors) and within which are woven their own values, stories, traditions and *waiata* (songs) (Mitchell, et al., in press b).

> From a Māori perspective, our children through their ancestral links, are connected through aeons of time to the original source. Some Māori, expert in genealogy, are able to recite their history from the beginning of the Māori world, the primeval parents, the gods and so forth, directly to their own ancestor and from there to their own family. Māori believe all children are born of the gods. It is vital that the child's spiritual connections to all that has gone before is nurtured (Lee, Carr, Soutar, & Mitchell, 2013).

Unique approaches to assessment have been developed that are founded in *te ao Māori* (the Māori world), using a Māori approach where multiple voices are included and *whānau* (extended family) are integral.

Other community approaches, such as the Family Partnership Model used to engage communities in a partnership to achieved "shared meaningful outcomes" in the development of Tasmanian Child and Family Centres, with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for children (McDonald, O'Byrne, & Prichard, 2015) are discussed in the next section.

In common these approaches hold a strengths based view of families and communities and connect families through intergenerational links. Programmes to promote learning and development are culturally congruent with families using them. Through deliberate means to find out and work in collaboration among professionals, families and community, educational beliefs and cultural values become visible, better able to be analysed, understood and used. This can be a basis for links made between cultural values and educational views that are held in the settings of home, early childhood service and community.

The empirical study of the New Zealand *Continuity of Early Learning: Learning Progress and Outcomes in the Early Years*, Mitchell et al. (Mitchell et al., in press-a, in press-b) gathered data from parent and teacher interview and assessment documentation in 19 ECEC services and eight schools. A focus was on the exchange of learning information between parents and families, ECEC services and schools at transition points. In this study, most of all, parents wanted information that they could understand and appreciated informal talking with the teacher. In ECE services, information was made permeable through learning stories written in a style that was accessible to children and families through engaging narratives, use of photographs and children's work, sending portfolios home and inviting contribution. Parents appreciated being able to "read" their children's portfolios. These parents also "wanted to have their insights and feedback listened and responded to within a partnership relationship with teachers/educators, and to gain an idea of their own influence and how they might help their child to progress. There was a sense that parents are ready and willing to do what they can to help their child if they know how they might do this." (p. 5).

Families have different informational needs. In a recent article, Cowie and Mitchell (in press) argued the need to "consider carefully the form, timing and focus of information that is shared with parents and to what extent its various features enable, or not, productive dialogues (reciprocal learning conversations) in support of children's learning and learning motivations" (p. 19). They argued that the extent to which teachers achieve this exchange is a matter of fairness and equity. One implication is for professionals to find out from families how they would like to communicate, such as a school in the *Continuity of Early Learning project* where parents chose Facebook as one of the forms of communication they would like.

*Kei tua o te Pae. Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars (Ministry of Education, 2005, 2007, 2009)* is a New Zealand resource set of collaborative, credit-based narrative assessment exemplars designed to "help teachers to understand and strengthen children's learning and show how children, parents and whānau can contribute to this assessment and ongoing learning". The resources

were accompanied by professional development available to all ECEC services. *Book 5. Assessment for learning: community* (Ministry of Education, 2005) is specifically focused on how documented assessments can invite people to participate in a particular learning community designed to foster children's learning.

An NZCER national survey carried out in 2007 (Mitchell, 2008) and a national evaluation of *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki,* a 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education, (Mitchell, Meagher Lundberg, Mara, Cubey, & Whitford, 2011) showed shifts in assessment practices and ECE service relationships with families. The strategic plan evaluation developed rubrics for assessment practices to gauge key principles about sociocultural assessment consistent with the national curriculum and the Ministry of Education's assessment exemplars *Kei Tua o te Pae. Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2005). The emphasis was on assessment for learning, i.e., formative assessment. The measure of assessment in each setting was derived from ratings of documented assessments, teacher interviews and a parent survey. Rubrics (Davidson, 2005) were developed which described the level of overall achievement for assessment, rated as "very good", "good", "fair" and "poor". Rubric ratings were then used to analyse shifts over time from 2004 to 2006 to 2009 in participating ECEC service assessment practices. Over this period of time there were positive shifts associated with service use of the exemplar resources, professional development and improved teacher qualifications. The shifts in teachers' assessment practices were mirrored by shifts in parents' involvement in assessment and planning. In 2009, 60% of parents reported taking part in planning and assessment for their child, up from 47% in 2006 and 36% in 2004. A similar shift in parent involvement in assessment and planning was found in the NZCER national survey of parents, where data from 2003 was compared with data from 2007.

## Communities with socioeconomic disadvantage

In much research literature "disadvantage" is primarily defined in terms of socioeconomic characteristics of families and communities. Children and families in disadvantaged communities are less likely to access early years education services and yet most likely to benefit from participation and collaboration with early years professionals (e.g., Arteaga, Humpage, Reynolds, & Temple, 2013; Eurydice network, 2009; Leseman & Slot, 2014).

Several recent studies in Australia (Grace, Bowes, & Elcombe, 2014; Skattebol et al., 2014) and New Zealand (Mitchell et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2013) have examined the issue of children's participation and families' engagement with early years services by finding out about the barriers and supports experienced by disadvantaged families as they made decisions and went about enrolling their child in early years services and collaborating with professionals. They do not measure child outcomes directly but analyse participant views of outcomes and the approaches and processes that enabled or thwarted engagement with early years services. The studies are useful in identifying principles and productive approaches to encourage participation and collaborative partnerships with disadvantaged families.

In common, the New Zealand (Mitchell et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2013) and Australian (Grace et al., 2014; Skattebol et al., 2014) studies used interviews and surveys of disadvantaged families from low income communities; and other key informants (early childhood teachers and family caseworkers for New Zealand study; service providers for Australian studies). Many of the barriers and enablers to participation came from the ways in which services were organised, funded and provided, the congruence with family values and the reception of families. These findings are consistent with much of the research on family engagement in ECE services that points to issues within services themselves that make them hard for particular families to accept (Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2011). Barriers can be categorised within four groups:

1. Structural barriers: Cost, lack of transport, high waiting lists, unsuitable hours, and location—families are excluded through economic reasons and because suitable services are not available in their locality. Transience is another reason for families not being able to access early years services.

2. Nature of provision: Provision is not congruent with family language and cultural aspirations, families want their home language and culture given value and upheld (strong finding for Pasifika families and some Māori families in New Zealand studies), families feel judged, not welcomed—families need to feel they belong in this place (all studies and other literature).

3. Personal reasons: lack of confidence/understanding in negotiating the system (families lack information), do not trust care of others, past negative educational experiences, want to remain "under the radar" of notice from government agencies, personal beliefs that care of preschool children should be in the home.

4. Other family priorities: housing, health, low income, family violence, drug and alcohol issues— these may take precedence over attending early years services.

## Structures, processes and outcomes of collaboration

The literature regarding collaboration with disadvantaged families suggests that a first priority is to address barriers to participation in early years services because attendance is the first step in collaboration.

At a service level, participation could be enabled by ensuring Goodstart early years services are low cost, locally available, and responsive to community needs. Some questions for consideration: How might Goodstart offer free or low cost ECE in low socioeconomic communities? Is an Equity Funding system possible and desirable? In what ways might Goodstart find out about aspirations and needs of local families? How might community consultations be undertaken? In the New Zealand study, providers who were successful in recruiting families were located in the community, experienced in working there and had expertise in delivering their service. They used a range of communication approaches to help them find out what was wanted – play days in the park, consultations/ discussions within the community, access to families through significant organisations, such as church, ethnic community groups, iwi (tribe) and services used by families. Grace et al. (2014) used The Ecocultural Questionnaire and the Ecocultural Family Interview to find out about family needs and views through their daily practices at home and in relation to services, and the meanings that the primary caregiver attached to these practices. At a community level, McDonald and O'Byrne (2015) explained the use of Family Partnership Model (FPM) to engage communities. The FPM has three core aspects and involves a five-day training programme and ongoing supervision:

1. A staged helping process that involves identifying parents' goals, exploring strategies, evaluating outcomes and joint decision-making on further steps.

2. Helper qualities, skills and behaviours which enable collaborative and respectful interactions (e.g., humility, personal integrity).

3. The theoretical basis for understanding parenting and parent-child relationships (Rossiter et al., 2011).

How might early years services be integrated with wider services to support families? In the New Zealand studies, this was achieved through caseworkers playing a brokering role to make information understandable and to facilitate and support connections with family services. In the Australian, New Zealand and many other provisions internationally, integrated early years services that combine ECEC with a 'one stop shop' that is not focused solely on the education and care of the child were used to enable integrated support. What are the structures of Goodstart services?

At a professional level, the families in these studies clearly indicated that respect for their family values, an understanding that families do their best, an open and welcoming attitude, and responsive relationships with professionals are necessary to recruit families to enrol. Beyond enrolment, Goodall and Montgomery (2015) describe a continuum between parent involvement with schools and parent engagement in children's learning. These authors suggest parent agency is increased as parents shift from involvement to engagement, and that in this process, the understanding of learning shifts from being regarded as a school responsibility to a shared parent and school responsibility. A New Zealand study (Clarkin-Phillips & Carr, 2012) has demonstrated such shifts within a process where professionals

intentionally increased parent and family engagement and agency in a kindergarten in a low socioeconomic community. The researchers analysed their data through the framework of "an affordance network of opportunity", describing how an environment can afford opportunities through increasing demand – in this case through making opportunities available (the opportunity exists but may not be recognised), inviting (opportunity is more insistent and inviting than just existing) and personalising. Personalised invitations are made to the invited person with whom the professional has a relationship and/or opportunities are made that recognise the family or person and the specific skills or qualities they might bring. Shifts in family agency were charted alongside these opportunities - although the authors point out that playgroup was just one catalyst for change which was also supported by "a jigsaw of a responsive and leadership-sharing culture". Shifts in agency were demonstrated by personal changes for parents interviewed – including families taking up employment and study opportunities, taking on leadership roles, and advocating for children.

## Discussion

In this paper, we have sought to provide insight into a range of approaches to collaboration that potentially enhance child outcomes.

### Principles for productive collaborations

We identified six key principles for productive collaborations, especially in communities experiencing disadvantage.

1. Hold a strengths-based view of children, families and communities – deficit positioning works against collaboration. Respectful relationships need to be at the heart of interactions with family and community members.

2. Work with an ecological understanding of the child in the context of their family and community. Engage with families and their wider community to understand aspirations and aims for children, draw on cultural knowledge and expertise, and work together to design solutions.

3. Develop services that are culturally congruent with those of family and community members. Connect families through intergenerational links.

4. Provide opportunities for families to say what desirable outcomes for their children would look like to them.

5. Enable equitable opportunities for engagement—this means communicating in ways and at times that suit family and community members. We know that collaboration involves active participation and partnership towards shared goals.

6. Offer professionals facilitating conditions to support collaboration— for example access to external researchers/advisers to offer tools for self-review, to help critical reflection, to evaluate outcomes.

**Potential directions for Goodstart**

We propose that a type of research very useful for generating understandings about engaging communities, families and early years professionals in ECE programmes to improve child and family outcomes, and develop interventions that can be 'scaled up' is design based implementation research. The brief review above shows that much research has been descriptive and exploratory, investigating types of parent and teacher partnerships, and processes that contribute to partnerships that seem to be productive of different child and family outcomes in different contexts.

Design based implementation research, a term used by Penuel and Fishman (2012), "is a form of design-based research that is aimed simultaneously at developing interventions and at improving their implementation" (p. 287). It has several characteristics that make it well equipped to investigate problems of practice in family, community and professional collaboration, and how these link to other variables, and to research and address these problems in context and then bring improvements to scale at the level of practice and educational systems.

- The primary research question is "What works when, how, and for whom?" Penuel, Fishman, Cheng and Sabelli (2011) identify other primary questions as "How do we improve this strategy to make it more sustainable?" and "What capacities does the system need to continue to improve?" Many sub-questions follow from these.

- Multiple stakeholders (community, families, professionals) are involved in identifying and defining the problem and shaping the research. In this case, the "problem" could be improving educational outcomes through collaboration. Involvement of stakeholders is crucial because implementation is not just about translating best research into best practice. Different stakeholders may contest the goals and conclusions of researchers/professionals. Since this is about implementation, it is ultimately those at the local level who determine its success. While some stakeholders may be open to change, others may be less open or resist change. Successful scaling up depends on these stakeholders being part of the solution.

- The first task is to translate identified "problems" of collaboration to enhance outcomes into interventions. Interventions would draw on what we know from many studies as outlined above—we do not need to reinvent this understanding. These interventions would be shaped into new materials (e.g., resources) and activities (e.g., professional development) through an iterative and collaborative process of design.

- Interventions would be trialled and research undertaken with a sample of settings. The research would analyse pre and post data (e.g., gained through observation, survey, student learning data, interview) as a strategy to evaluate improvements, inform design and improve impact. A programme logic model showing the potential relationship between collaboration and improved child outcomes could be tested.

- Through this iterative and collaborative process, interventions developed for these settings would be translated into interventions that are able to be scaled up for many settings. Further iterative research would take place in these other settings.

The brief review has suggested ideas about potential areas of focus that could be used to frame possibilities for intervention and in the design of resource, activities and research.

*Development of literacy*

Development of literacy, broadly defined, provides a relevant and meaningful context for collaboration between early learning educators and parents. Children's needs provide a meaningful context for learning to which parents, and often grandparents, are attracted. Family-focused literacy experiences and learning opportunities shared by children, parents and educators provide a meaningful focus for collaboration.

*Community/family engagement in curriculum and assessment*

Productive and sustained conversations about learning between teachers and parents and a curriculum that is permeable, open to contribution, offer opportunities for meaningful engagement in which each party learns from the other.

*Development of integrated provision of ECE*

Community engagement models for developing integrated provision are valuable for ensuring services are responsive to community and family needs and aspirations, and for enabling these members to participate in developing the provision.

# Conclusion

We have provided practice examples from Australia, Canada and New Zealand that offer useful ideas for Goodstart. The brief asked us to comment on the questions:

How would we know if effective parent/early years professionals' collaboration is taking place?

- Ask families in organised ways such as holding gatherings to which family members are invited for the purposes of seeking their perspectives on collaboration/communication which are recorded and used for tracking over time. These could be carried out once or twice a year, e.g. invite this discussion at the beginning of the year and review at the end of the year.

- Develop 'how would we know' list with the families and revisit at the end of the year.

- Increase in family (parents, caregivers, grandparents) involvement in curriculum /assessment/activities.

What would be the indicators we would track?

- Participation indicators—children coming to the early years centre regularly, every day of week (link to evidence on value of ECE on regular basis in 2 or 3 years before school); centre attracting more families experiencing disadvantage; parents staying longer at the centre.

- Involvement of family and community in curriculum implementation/centre activities including (1) supporting children by participating alongside them, (2) family members sharing knowledge, skills, stories with the children in the centre (sharing their funds of knowledge) as part of curriculum implementation.

- Family and community members contributing to assessment (verbally, in writing, with home stories/photographs) , sharing assessment stories from centre with other family members.

- Involvement of families in roles within centre.

- Audit of which families are involved – all families, specific groups, who is excluded?

- Family satisfaction/extent the 'how would we know ' list had been met.

How can we relate to child outcomes on an aggregate level and individual level?

- Qualitative case studies of family and community collaboration and outcomes.

- Develop rubrics of collaboration and track changes over time in relation to outcomes.

- Design based intervention studies around collaboration show positive change over time linked to outcomes (baseline to final data).

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