

Early Years Hub Study Tour - Key Findings

Intent

This document is a follow on from the Early Years Hub Study Tour that was conducted from May to July 2016. The intent of that Study Tour was to gather information and knowledge from sites that are exemplary in their practice when working in the early years with parents and whānau. This report will outline specific findings for each of the key areas of focus and recommendations for the development of the organisation and systems of The Tāmaki Early Years Hub.

Key Areas of Focus

- Whānau Centred Practice
- Parent Led Initiatives
- Responding to Parent Needs
- Combining Services
- Custom Building
- Co-Design Practice

In addition, some practitioners that we met shared other thoughts in particular around governance, management, structure, community engagement and evaluation. These have been included at the end.

Site Visits

There were four study tours, that included a total of ten sites. The majority of sites were in Auckland, with the exception being one in Palmerston North. The Early Childhood Education Centres are: Te Puna Kōhungahunga, Auckland Girls Grammar Childcare, Play and Learn Nature, Chysalis, Nurture Early Learning. The Parenting Centres are: Manurewa Parenting Hub, The Parenting Place. The Multi-Purpose Facilities are: Henderson Living and Learning, Te Aroha Noa and Takanini Family Service Centre.

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In a Snapshot

Below is a list of the key findings for each key focus area.

~ Whānau Centred Practice

- Whānau centred practice needs to have a fluidity in the space and its' purpose
- Whānau to Whānau role modelling the culture of the space
- Management need to be explicit about the culture being firmly based on whānau centred practice

~ Parent Led Initiatives

- Parent led initiatives are more popular for whānau to attend
- Parents best lead what they know well
- In times of low attendance, a nudge to encourage whānau to take more ownership on always helps
- Processes, Systems and Structure's need to work around whānau. Not the other way around
- Parent-led can be tough work - ongoing perseverance, commitment and sustainability are important

~ Responding to Parent Needs

- Setting up within an area of need and being easily accessible
- Be reflective of practice and responsive to feedback

~ Combining Services

- The actual lay out of the space is important to ensure services are able to maintain fluidity
- Ensure that all of the services are able to fall underneath the same kaupapa
- Strong relationships and communication between services is key for practitioners and participants
- Flexible staff and equipment between services help to ensure smooth running of all services

~ Custom Building

- Build with parent involvement in leadership in mind
- Community may assume that the space is not for them - ensure a strong communication plan
- Design build can determine how the kaupapa is brought to life - or not. Build to show heart.
- Anticipate growth

~ Co-Design Practice

- Parent involvement within The Early Childhood Education Centres
- Parent involvement in Services

~ Other Thoughts

- Governance thoughts
- Management thoughts
- Financial and Structure thoughts
- Community thoughts
- Evaluation thoughts

~ Whānau Centred Practice

Whānau centred practice needs to have a fluidity in the space and its' purpose

When truly ensuring that whānau are at the centre of the organisations' focus, organisations have ensured that their purpose directly reflects that. They ensure that whānau really understand that this is important for the organisation and are encouraged to connect and engage as much as possible. "Once you are whānau, you are always whānau" is one statement that was said to us. This means that the policies and structures in place do not prevent participation in any way. Past children returning to visit, holiday sessions and activities, a lot of tuakana-teina modelling are all examples of that. There is a feeling of 'more-than' - it's more-than an open door policy, it's more-than accepting the odd connection. It's about full engagement as opposed to just involvement.

This is further enabled, through the creation of physical spaces to do that. Within an ECE setting, the space is built larger than the licensed requirements to cater to the higher number of adults that will be present. There will be more spaces for sit down chats, to encourage the creation of friendships between whānau. A homely and relaxed environment is created with fires burning, music playing and easy access to food and drinks to foster a 'home away from home' experience. Events are organised to develop opportunities for whānau start to become involved in the space.

Whānau to Whānau role modelling the culture of the space

With the spaces fostering whānau involvement, it was often seen that whānau that have been engaging for a while, connect and support newer whānau into the environment and the culture of the space. This helps whānau take ownership and grow - themselves and any leadership work they are doing. One organisation talked about the making of fry bread regularly - how it was originally made by one 'fry bread expert' practitioner, she supported one whānau to learn it and that whānau is now supporting another whānau to learn it. They independently set up and bake without any support required.

There has been at times conflict between parents when varying parenting styles and judgements come into play. However in the organisation that raised this, they also used this as a learning opportunity for all.

Management need to be explicit about the culture being firmly based on whānau centred practice

Governance and management are important to create a firm foundation based on whānau centred practice through out the organisation. If staff believe that their role is to support whānau to take ownership of the space as the first and best teachers for their children, then that belief is embedded in the practices of the organisation through out. Organisations also talked about a 'decentralised approach' to ensure that the power to make decisions is spread through out. This means that there needs to be open lines of communication through out the systems structure, and relationships between staff, whānau, management and governance all need to be strong.

For whānau centred practice to happen, two key aspects were identified repeatedly:

- A firm kaupapa and philosophy that the organisation can draw from.
- Great people in the organisation as well as professional development opportunities for all staff to learn about the importance of placing whānau at the centre of all decision making.

"Be consistently vigilant about keeping to your kaupapa no matter what. Once that kaupapa is firm, find people that fit to that model. Don't think that people can be taught to believe in it."

~ Parent Led Initiatives

Parent led initiatives are more popular for whānau to attend

When organisations provide the space for parents to lead activities, they are more popular than the activities that the organisations are running. Parents are always supported in the initiatives as well. One example of this is an ECE that runs a noho marae once a year with whānau leading the whole event. They enable the use of the centres resources and maintain communication, however the choice of the marae right through to the running of the kitchen and activities are all lead by whānau. This annual event is a part of their culture and enables whānau to feel and become more engaged with the centre and activities through out the year. We were able to talk with parents at a few of the sites, and a lot of those parents had continued onto employment with the organisations. Some even left for a time to study and return qualified. *“It happens by default, because we are parents and we just let the connections happen”.*

At one organisation, they used a set and specific process of including parents in their delivery. These activities were parent-led, but not parent-developed. This was a significantly different approach to others and appeared to have different ways of working that altered the outcomes of the service. The parents were regarded more as employees rather than participants that were growing and learning as well.

Parents best lead what they know well

Majority of parent-led initiatives were parent-developed, which enables those parents to identify what they knew well and wanted to partake in leading. For some initiatives, they were ethnic-specific while for others they were skill-specific. *“Parents will do what they can, we just need to help them where we can.”*

In times of low attendance, a nudge to encourage whānau to take more ownership on always helps

It was acknowledged that parents appear to be more time poor now, so to ‘nudge’ whānau to raise the importance of their involvement in their children’s lives helped to encourage whānau to take on more ownership. Strong communication and relationships with management again are important to foster involvement. The first connection that the whānau have into the organisation is highlighted as important to ‘set the scene’. One organisation includes in their first introduction kōrero, a focus around the expectations of whānau involvement and confirms a commitment to this.

Processes, Systems and Structure’s need to work around whānau. Not the other way around

Systems appear to be a barrier for some organisations commitment to parent-led initiatives, whereas other organisations create systems to ensure there were no barriers at all. One example of that is how ECE centres encourage whānau to bring their children to their centres. Some centres have set session times that parents need to abide by, where as others encourage creating session times and hours that work for the whānau. The ability to be flexible is what appears to provide the most results when encouraging parents to lead. *“...the family enters into the organisation and the services wrap around, catering to the needs that the family have. This is more so a culture of the organisation, rather than stated within the practice.”*

Parent-led can be tough work - ongoing perseverance, commitment and sustainability are important

Parent led initiatives need to maintain fluidity because they are based on the work of parents who are often growing within themselves and learning as they develop. This can mean that initiatives will come and go, change in focus, or parents move onto the bigger and better things.

~ Responding to Parent Needs

Setting up within an area of need and being easily accessible

Most organisations, especially parent services have taken great thought into the physical location of their site. The site needs to be accessible to parents within walking distance if possible and linked to other facilities that whānau connect and engage with. These links will also determine what the needs are of the whānau that engage and therefore the services that are offered. One hub intentionally set up within a schooling environment and then physically moved from one school to another and created satellite offices to enable whānau to keep engaged. *“Having the school connections helps parents understand that it’s a safe space, because the school is their community.”* Being responsive of the needs that will arise is regarded as important through out. One organisation realised the need for access to free food, so set up a bread drop off and pick up service that is positioned within a lounge area to prevent any stigma.

Be reflective of practice and responsive to feedback

Growing organically enables organisations to respond openly to feedback with the anticipation that nothing will remain the same. One organisation that has been active for over 25 years has changed every service that they provide in that time after reflection and feedback. The perception is to build onto and morph services, rather than remain stagnant. The ideal practice is that every services that is offered, has been a direct response to what the community needs are. This means that sometimes, services change or end, as the needs end. Likewise, other services arise and develop, responding to new needs. One example is when an organisation rented houses to use as transition homes as a response for community housing. The plan hasn't worked well and so they are ‘re-calibrating’ it to see if it will work better in a different way.

Different organisations talked about their reflective practice in different ways. Some embark on set and specific evaluation while others believe that having ongoing kōrero with whānau including reflective practices through out their involvement enables a firm decision making process on future service planning. It was also acknowledged that different services and practitioners may reflect in different ways as well. The importance however is placed on ensuring that reflection is an expected phase of delivering any service.

“Sometimes needs become apparent through recurring themes [that people] have in conversation, realising common threads... there can sometimes be an ‘ah-ha’ moment in conversations, staff realise “that’s what’s happening here! What are we going to do about it?”

~ Combining Services

The actual lay out of the space is important to ensure services are able to maintain fluidity

This is a key point that was made clear at almost every site visit. The physical space of the building and the lay out that is created within, will determine the way that the services interact with each other. Sites that held spaces independently from each other were less engaged with each other and less able to commit to mutual benefits. The combined services in spaces that needed to be shared appeared to be more engaged and fluid. Those shared spaces could also be temporarily separated with moving walls and the need for plenty of storage between activities was highlighted. Some staff also noted that sometimes there weren't enough break away spots, and the noise of mutually inhabited spaces was loud - sound proofing was suggested.

Ensure that all of the services are able to fall underneath the same kaupapa

A realisation of the clash of kaupapa when several services join has resulted in some major conflicts in some of the organisations. Therefore creating a firm kaupapa that all services are able to identify with and refer back to is highlighted as important. One organisation stressed the need to do this prior to any confirmation of collaborations. The kaupapa is also highlighted as important when hiring staff - ensuring that they understand and believe in it helps the kaupapa to truly come alive in the space.

Strong relationships and communication between services is key for practitioners and participants

The development of relationships and maintaining strong ties internal to the organisation needs to be included in the kaupapa, explicit in position descriptions and managed regularly with key team working opportunities. There is also value to external relationships outside of the organisation and opportunities to develop those is regarded as also important. Maintaining positive relationships between practitioners enables smoother transitions of participants between services and ease in combining services and collaborating between. One practitioner talked of the difference in quality for whānau when offering a wrap around service model - when services are well connected and collaborating their skills and workload to come together, as opposed to compartmentalising services and shifting whānau around the system created.

“You can enter whatever door you like, you might enter the SKIP door, but you have access to everything... growing on relationships rather than some intake procedure.”

One example of the opposite way of working is when one organisation was approached, I was informed that the ECE was run independently and would need to be approached separately to see if we were able to visit them at the same time.

Flexible staff and equipment between services help to ensure smooth running of all services

Some organisations floated staff and equipment between services as per need to help financially spread the load. A positive outcome of this was also that those staff and relationships between the services naturally grew strong in that sharing of resources. One example of that is the practitioners that help to transport in the organisations own vans for all of the different programmes.

~ Custom Building

Build with parent involvement in leadership in mind

If we want parents to be involved in any leadership, the consensus was that the physical environment needs to work for them to be able to lead. Specifically, the needs of their children need to be taken care of and the environment where leadership meets can not be an unsafe space for children. If the needs of the children are taken care of, then the parents are able to focus on their ability to lead. Access to power plugs, breakable or expensive equipment, proximity to roads and carparks are all factors that will prevent parents to remain in a space. If the space enables parents to naturally gather in a homely environment, they will and leadership will naturally emerge. One ECE has built a kitchen bench at their entrance point, to encourage parents to pause and enjoy a drink with something to eat. It was also acknowledged that having movable walls or equipment to enable small spaces to be quickly created can help with impromptu small gatherings.

“People want parent participation, but then don’t build for it. So they don’t get it.”

Community may assume that the space is not for them - ensure a strong communication plan

When creating a space that is not like anything else in the community, community members may not have any previous knowledge to assume that they are able to access that space. Creating a strong engagement and communication plan will ensure the whole community understands what the space is, and who it is for.

“There has been a community assumption from the very beginning that this centre was not for certain members of the community - it’s too flash and too expensive for their children.”

Design build can determine how the kaupapa is brought to life - or not. Build to show heart.

The majority of sites visited were older repurposed buildings. These organisations had big wish lists and some even plans to renovate. Of the ones that were custom built, there were lessons to learn as well. It was observed by us, just how influential the physical building is, in how the kaupapa of the organisations can be brought to life. Some examples:

- One ECE centre was purpose built with the intention of separating age groups of children, types of children activities and types of adult activities. The intentional separation left no room for spontaneity.
- One hub built a cafe and didn’t built a full kitchen. Another hub is fundraising to build a full commercial kitchen and cafe. Each of the hubs have quite different kaupapa and these are reflected in their practice.
- One hub has intentionally not built an ECE to prevent it becoming core business. Another hub has intentionally built an ECE to build their core business of parenting around it.
- One social service space had all of their offices separated out into different rooms. They then pulled out all the walls to encourage everyone to work better together.
- Several spaces use shared staffroom to encourage practitioners to engage with each other. One space doesn’t have a staffroom at all, encouraging practitioners to engage with whānau in a communal lounge.
- One space has incorporated that concept of manaakitanga in their layout. Ensuring their kaupapa remains strong in their practice.

Anticipate growth

When building, there should be an expectation that the community will take ownership of the space and we will always need more.

“The building is simply a building, the important thing is the people. Do lots of things to create a team, create a vision, how does this place work, critical reflections. Do it all often.”

~ Co-Design Practice

There was only one organisation that displayed true co-design initiatives. Te Aroha Noa is a well established organisation with a firm kaupapa of whānau centred practice and involving parent leadership through out their services. Because of their kaupapa, they firmly believe in the concept of creating all of their services with practitioners and participants side by side. The way that they practice is worth highlighting, so that we can learn from their experience and build it into our own practice within the hub.

*“Let go of all power and control in the situation,
to enable participants to lead and grow in the next steps.”*

Parent involvement within The Early Childhood Education Centres

There are two ECE's on site that were developed from community need and ran as playgroups previously. They are run differently to any other known models in New Zealand in that they have parents and teachers working side by side with the children. Parents come with their children on the morning sessions with the parent leaders being paid for their time. There is a relaxed environment in the ECE's, where parents can come to play with their children and help educate, and also hang out with others parents. The whānau that join the ECE's know about the culture of the centre and that if the child is under 3 years old, it is expected for a parent to attend with the child.

Financially, the system is tight, with the full qualified funding model paying for the service, and the funds allocated to pay for the ECE teachers divided up to enable some money to pay for parent educators as well. The manager also tries to hold the numbers low, at 45 (licensed for 75) to enable fluidity in drop in whānau that join in like a playgroup. The centres have an open door policy that allows for whānau to join the ECE without any pressure. A whānau room was also built alongside the ECE, to enable larger events and initiatives to happen with the ECE leading or taking part.

Parent involvement in Services

Te Aroha Noa work encourage whānau to create initiatives through out their organisation as they request. They have a SKIP Co-ordinator who uniquely sits outside of all of the services and supports any activities that any whānau are interested in developing. In the past, this has resulted in specific events and focused playgroups. She is currently focused on developing a specific project to develop certain parent champions to design their own initiatives.

~ Other Thoughts

Governance thoughts

Governance boards appear to be an ongoing process even after years of being formed. Ensuring that they are as independent as possible appears to be good practice, and that certain board members are directly linked to services and fields that are relevant to the hub. Having strategically high profile people on boards can develop the culture of the board to be opportunistic and powerful. One of the key learnings that Te Aroha Noa CEO (Bruce Madden) shared with us, is that having a Trust Board that is willing to take risks, enables great things to develop.

Management thoughts

The management of the space is key to the smooth running, especially between any ECE space and the community spaces in the building. Several organisations mentioned difficulties at the beginning of ventures when the culture of the space was forming. Some organisation found it beneficial to have leadership teams where they separate out the running of varying services. However there is a need to interlink in their work and support each other. This has enabled supporting each other and preventing burnout.

Financial and Structure thoughts

All of the organisations received funds from three sources: Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Education and Philanthropic funds. Te Aroha Noa will often receive seed money from Philanthropic trusts that enable them to evidence the need and then receive ongoing funds from Government entities thereafter.

Having the right people hired for the right work was highlighted repeatedly. At times, this has meant that people are employed to respond to specific projects and their employment conditions factored around that. This can lead to a lot of part time positions in the organisations. The key people we met and talked to, highlighted that it is the people that work within the organisation, that makes the difference.

Community thoughts

There is a strong emphasis on the relationship that organisations have with the community and other services around them. They hold regular networking meetings with other learning and social services to discuss what they are doing and how they can work together.

For a community led service to engage well, the first contact that community has with the organisation is very important. Creating a 'meeter and greeter' at the front space is an idea that was discussed. This enables the scene to be set from the beginning that the organisation is about catering to community needs. Spending time with families in casual conversations through a 'lounge area' enables families to take ownership of the organisation and for staff to learn and understand true needs of families.

Evaluation thoughts

Developing a culture of strong reflection is how most of the organisations viewed evaluation. It was suggested that creating a 'friend of the organisation' that supports the evaluation framework can be very helpful. Forming a partnership with a university over a long period of time, is a successful model.

*"Have your own vision and kaupapa, keep critically reflecting on it,
advocate with funders about how it needs to be done."
- Bruce Madden (Te Aroha Noa)*

Suggested Steps Forward

Through out the four study tours, the six key areas of focus have been well and truly highlighted as important. Key findings within each of those areas have been raised and expanded on, in this document. It is suggested that The Working Party now take these key findings into consideration when building and developing the structure of The Tāmaki Early Years Hub.

These key findings have really emphasised how important the creation of the kaupapa will be for The Tāmaki Early Years Hub. That will be the wero for The Working Party to take up. It was consistently reiterated to us how important the people on the ground are and how the building and systems being developed only support them to do the work.

With that in mind, one suggestion is for an event to be held between the working party, key community members of Tāmaki and experts that have knowledge to support the first steps of the hub. It could be a chance to bring some people around New Zealand together to share their thoughts and experience with local organisations and leaders that will be involved in the Early Years Hub. These people could be experts in early years centre architecture builds, in developing and managing multi-service hubs, in developing co-design and parent leadership, in best practice for supporting whānau growth and childhood development in the early years.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement is given to the following organisations that supported the study tours and reports that came out of them.

- SKIP and The Glen Innes Family Centre for the hours that Tara Moala spent in organising and running the study tours, as well as the writing up of the reports.
- Tāmaki Learning Champions for the hours that Philippa Holmes spent in attending and note taking from the study tours, as well as collaborating in the writing of the reports.
- The Tāmaki Regeneration Company for the travel expenses to get to each Study Tour including the flight and expenses to get to Palmerston North.
- The time given by the staff of each of the nine sites that were visited and their kindness in sharing their knowledge and expertise for us while we visited and to include in this report.