

*Original Research Paper*

## **Partnerships in Integrated Early Childhood Centres: Getting from Policies to Practices**

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**Key Words:** partnership, integrated services, policy, professional development

### **Abstract**

*Working with parents as partners with early childhood services in supporting their children's well-being has become increasingly complex as early childhood services move into integrated services provision. This paper reports on one element of a three-phase exploratory study into the ways in which parent partnerships are enacted in early childhood and family services in South Australia. The research took place shortly after the South Australian Government announced plans for integrated Children's Centres, bringing together children's services, schools, health and family services and community programs. The research process encompassed a policy analysis, case studies and professional development workshops. This article focuses on the professional development workshops examining the ways in which childcare providers, kindergarten and pre-school educators, community nurses and other service providers engaged with families. The types of engagement with families which practitioners described reflected diverse practices and approaches. These were driven by the type of service provided, the terms of service provision and the need to accomplish particular service outcomes, such as timely attendance or payment of fees. The workshops highlighted the diverse ways in which practitioners define and enact partnerships and the resultant discursive contest between different meanings and practices. They provided a valuable process towards the development of a shared understanding of the goals of integrated services provision.*

### **Introduction**

Early childhood education and care services in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere have been moving towards a holistic approach to meeting the needs of young children and their families. The challenges of integrating service provision to families across childcare and education services, and primary health and family support services have been explored in South Australia since the establishment of Children's Centres, bringing together childcare, schools, health and family services and community programs. A policy report for early childhood policy and services in South Australia (Wright, 2005) recommended the integrated provision of services, with families as "active participants in the shaping of the new service system" (2005, p. 94). The issue of partnership, both with parents and with

other service providers requires a process of developing and implementing authentic partnerships which enable services to work with each other and with families.

The South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services provides pre-school education programs in a range of government funded centres, including kindergartens, child-parent centres (CPCs), and integrated centres (such as Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting). These centres provide sessional pre-school for eligible children.

The research project discussed in this paper was a three phase project which included:

- an analysis of the parent partnership policies enacted by the various institutions involved in Children's Centres,
- case studies of two sites to identify how parent partnerships were enacted by and between services, and
- a series of three workshops with practitioners drawn from across the spectrum of service providers with current or future involvement in Children's Centre services.

The workshops included childcare workers, pre-school and kindergarten teachers, community nurses, social workers and others involved in providing services to families with young children. The workshops provided opportunities for practitioners to reflect on the ways in which they defined and enacted partnerships with parents and other services in their workplaces. This paper focuses on the process of work-shopping ideas about partnership and strategies for generative development of shared understandings around the concept of partnerships.

The pilot study was supported by an Advisory Group with representation from the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), the Department of Health (DoH) and the Child Youth and Women's Health Service.

## **Literature Review**

The concept of partnership as the central point of inquiry for the research reflects its increasing significance to policies and practices in the early childhood sector. The literature review will first detail some of the research into the policy dimensions of partnership approaches to human services delivery, before examining research into professional relationships with families.

Partnership and collaboration was developed as a central feature of the United Kingdom's approach to education under the Blair Government, replacing the Conservative emphasis on markets and competition (Tett, Crowther, & O'Hara, 2003). Research into the UK experience identified that the concept of partnership requires careful attention to the ways in which power relations organise the experience of partnership.

In policy terms, partnership is typically presented as a pragmatic and benevolent structure for collaborative relationships, resource sharing, and 'joined-up' human services delivery with families as active participants in shaping the services they receive (Wright, 2005). As in the South Australian policy approach, the UK government focused on partnership and collaboration as the best way to improve services, promote efficiencies and respond to complex needs (Milbourne, Macrae, & Maguire, 2003; Tett et al., 2003).

The Education Action Zones in the United Kingdom located parents as participants in a partnership with schools and services, however research into actual practices found that parental involvement did not extend to giving parents decision-making power in schools (Gewirtz, Dickson, Power, Halpin, & Whitty, 2005). Educators continued to exercise

determinant power with parents as passive recipients. The researchers argued that parent involvement schemes were commonly underpinned by assumptions of parental deficits of knowledge and practice which would be assisted through their involvement in schools (2005).

Whilst the rhetoric of partnership draws on the business discourse of efficiency and power-sharing, Cardini's analysis of partnership practices in the UK Education Action Zones (2006) also concluded that the actual practices did not reflect the inclusive, power-sharing promise of the policy approach. Cardini (2006) identified that the partnerships practices were facilitating and legitimising an increasingly centralised policy process and private sector involvement in the delivery of public policies. She argued that a progressive theory of partnerships had to "recognize power and establish working relationships in which struggle and dissent are discussable and transformable issues" (2006, p. 412).

Tett et al. (2003) also argue for recognition of a 'politics of policy' wherein the notion of 'partnerships' is contestable. They noted that community educators regarded partnerships as effective when they were "able to develop shared aims and objectives with the other agencies at a micro-level" (2003, p. 47). Their research indicated that if community members were to be involved in genuinely empowering partnerships, there needed to be a context of long-term community development.

Examining the implementation of the *New Community Schools* initiative in Scotland in the late 1990s, Martin, Tett and Kay (1999) identified that time, effort and resources were needed to develop a shared strategy and vision for collaboration, if cultural differences between professional groups, bureaucratic interests and statutory restrictions which undermined partnership efforts were to be overcome (Martin et al., 1999). Using three case studies of home-school and community links designed to involve parents in the education of their children, they concluded that collaboration needed to extend across the 'values, purposes, tasks and conditions' which determined the context of activities, whilst allowing all partners to make their distinctive contributions.

This contention is supported by research by Milbourne et al. (2003) which examined a multi-agency approach to providing services for UK children at risk of school exclusion. They found that inter-agency work was most effective when individuals had worked together over time, developing mutual trust and shared perspectives, however the families and children at risk of exclusion had no effective opportunity for contributions to developing strategies to better meet their needs. The absence of an effective involvement with the 'target community' consequently reproduced a stigmatised model of families at risk of exclusion as responsible for failing to maintain their inclusion.

Tett et al. (2003) caution that partnerships are characterised by processes of inclusion and exclusion and that power tends to rest with the main funding source. Maintaining an inclusive partnership with members of marginalised communities requires careful attention to avoid 'professionalist agendas' resting on assumptions of parental inadequacy.

The potential risk of adverse outcomes for disadvantaged communities in partnership initiatives was reflected in the evaluation of New Zealand's 1989 education reforms, *Tomorrow's Schools* (New Zealand Council of Educational Research [NZCER] 2008). The reforms aimed to develop parent partnerships with schools through devolving management to the community level. Longitudinal analysis of the reforms over 10 years by the NZCER found that parent involvement and school funding had actually declined overall, while low socio-economic schools had gone backwards (NZCER, 2008).

In her analysis of the *Tomorrow's Schools* policy, Timperley (1994) noted that school-community partnerships required professionals to learn about the values and concerns of the community.

This learning is enhanced if schools encourage parents to exercise influence and engage in joint problem-solving. Achieving school responsiveness depends more on the attitudes and skills of the participants in the partnership than on the structural changes enacted in the recent legislation (Timperley, 1994).

This literature suggests that the outcomes of policies promoting parental involvement in care and education services vary widely dependent on the cultural and social capital of the local community and how closely it aligns with professionally defined agendas. Given that many services are directed to communities identified as having high needs, class and cultural differences between service providers and families are commonly identified issues.

Partnerships between services and professionals working with families are integral to notions of collaborative practice, such as the teacher/therapist combination for children with identified additional learning or developmental needs. In contexts where individual practitioners from education and health services work with the same children and families, different service goals, contractual arrangements and terms of service provision reproduce the structural divisions between agencies (Forbes, 2006). Forbes argues for recognition of new types of social capital — bonding, bridging and linking — which characterise new ways of assessing and strategically developing the forms of relationships between collaborating or partnering agencies in their work with families. Social capital is defined by Putnam (1995, pp. 664–665) as: “features of social life — networks, norms and trust — that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. The norms include reciprocity, cooperation and tolerance. ... Social capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant norms and trust.”

Building frameworks for collaborative professional practice in early childhood settings requires services to broaden their focus from individual children to families and the wider community and to orient service provision to a team approach, where diverse practitioners work with shared roles across family health and education and welfare needs (Surbeck, 1998). Bringing parents into the team as partners for child and family well-being is a further challenge to the notion of partnership.

The ways in which services engage with families is central to the issue of partnership, challenging the institutionalised power of services and practitioners with the specific knowledge of parents as experts on their family's experiences and needs. Enabling parents to exercise power in their relationship to services remains a challenge even where practitioners have successfully forged ways of integrating service provision. Across different services practitioners bring often unspoken expectations of parents' conduct and beliefs about 'good' and 'bad' parents. The literature suggests that 'good' parents are seen to share the culture, values and goals of professionals and act in ways which meet the expectations of professionals. Parents from marginalised communities and cultural practices can easily be characterised as 'failed' parents rather than a manifestation of exclusionary practices within the service culture (Centre for Community Child Health [CCCH], 2005; Keyes 2002; Todd 2003).

Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) argue that parental knowledge is constructed as 'other' in much early childhood research literature, being seen variously as inadequate, supplementary or unimportant. They argue that achieving equitable staff-parent relationships requires

changing communications with parents to be inclusive and respectful of them. Furthermore, as Winkworth, McArthur, Layton, Thomson and Wilson (2010) found in their study of isolated parents, mothers were less likely to engage with services when they felt judged and under surveillance.

As with partnership between service providers, practitioners' partnerships with parents tend to be assumed as always a 'good thing'. Concepts of partnerships with parents range from formal involvement through to informal interactions and brief conversations – or '*partnership on the run*' – which characterises much of the interaction between child care practitioners and parents (CCCH, 2005). Professionals' expectations of partnerships with parents are grounded within their institutional framework of professional practices. Sharing power with parents includes acknowledging parents' primary role in their children's lives and professionals resisting constructing their knowledge base and cultural practices as 'better' than the real parent (CCCH, 2005).

In healthcare settings, partnerships with parents are bounded by professionals' knowledge of the presenting health problem, with parents seen as responsible for the ongoing health care for their child (Coyne & Cowley, 2007). Nurses expect parents to participate in their child's care, enabling them to attend to other duties. Coyne and Cowley make the point that staff workloads and organisational hierarchies create nurses' reliance on parents' care for their children, inhibiting their capacity to support families adequately through the experience of the child's health crisis and hospitalisation.

Paradoxically, initiatives to support parent partnerships can have adverse effects. Examining the creation of Parent Partnership Officers for children with special educational needs in England and Wales, Todd (2003) argues that some parents were further disempowered by a new layer of decision-making around their child's needs, instead of being able to directly approach teachers.

Working in partnership with parents suggests that workable mutual relationships rely on developing practitioners' understandings of the specific complexities of parents' and children's needs. Providing appropriate service responses in ways which can be readily taken up by parents and which are integrated with a complementary service support system, have been critical features of successful models of parenting support (Day & Davis, 1999). Lack of professional transparency in communicating with parents about assessment and service provision inhibits the development of mutual trust between families and practitioners (Band, Lindsay, Soloff, Peacey, Gascoigne, & Radford, 2002).

The need for practitioners to acquire specific understandings of family needs becomes more visible where children with disabilities from culturally diverse backgrounds need to access services. Kalyanpur and Harry (1997) note that professionals' interpretation of parent behaviour and values were influenced by their cultural understandings. Open dialogue about cultural practices and beliefs and continuity in building relationships provided ways forward for services which did not further marginalise families from minority cultures. Kalyanpur and Harry (1997) argue that cultural awareness can be developed through reflective practice wherein practitioners question their goals for the families and children with whom they work.

The research literature highlights that partnerships between agencies and with parents require careful attention to process and resources as there are many identified traps. These include manifestations of 'partnership' as professionals organising parents' involvement, further marginalising and stigmatising targeted families, increasing the layers of administrative complexity, judging parents for failing to meet unspoken professional

expectations or for not conforming to dominant cultural practices and ignoring the expertise parents have about their family.

The introduction of integrated early childhood services provided opportunities to explore how concepts of partnership are expressed in the early childhood practitioner workforce in South Australia. The researchers conducted a series of three workshops for early childhood professionals, educators, social workers, community and health workers which aimed to identify how personnel from different professional practice backgrounds understood 'parent partnership' and the possible impact of this on developing shared understandings of partnership in an integrated service context.

### **Methodology**

The research project used an inquiry framework as a way of developing shared knowledge across different professional workforces and worksites (Lipman, 1991; Roulston 2009). A community of inquiry is the social and educational context that leads to "questioning, reasoning, connecting, deliberating, challenging, and developing problem-solving techniques" (Lipman, 1991). The key concept of partnerships in integrated children's services was interrogated across a number of data sources and techniques.

Critical policy analysis drawing on Ball (1990) and Bacchi (1999) was used to develop an understanding of the policy context of integrated children's services (Nichols & Jurvansuu, 2008). The three practitioner inquiry and reflection workshops examined the ways in which different professional groups worked with families. A third element of participant observation in two sites with multiple children's services explored site specific ways in which partnership with families is realised.

The practitioner workshops element of the research project aimed to support discussion between practitioners from different professions and worksites reflecting on aspects of their practice. The series of workshops was advertised through education and health services networks targeting staff working with young children and families in child care, kindergartens, pre-schools, community health programs, home visiting programs and family support programs.

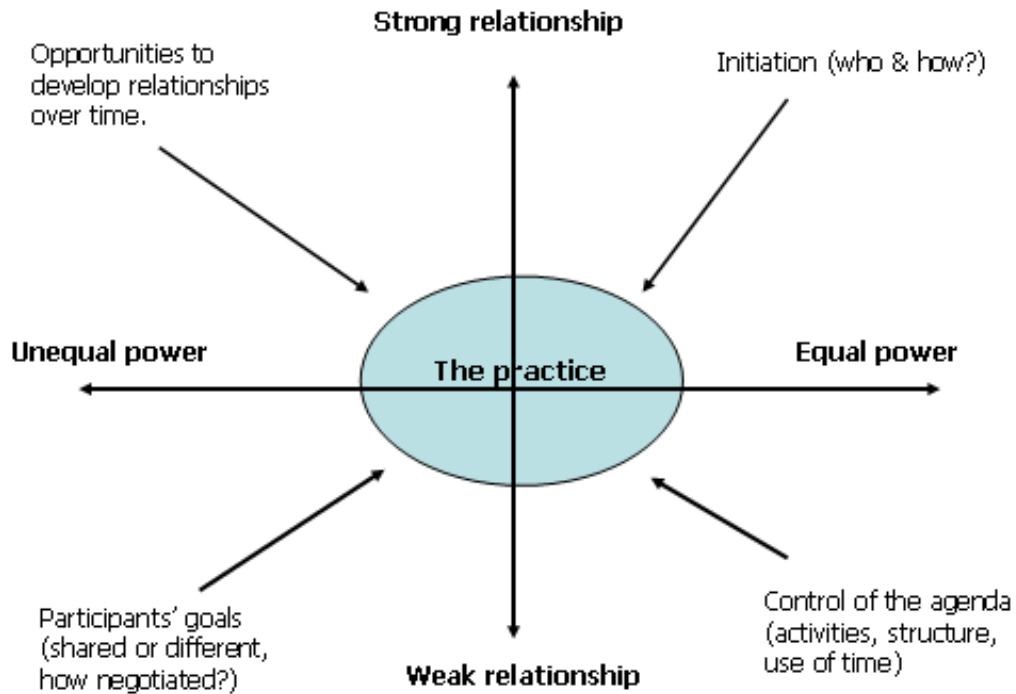
Three workshops were conducted. The first workshop, with around 20 participants, examined definitions of partnership, the policy context of integrated children's services and the different services involved in working with families. The second workshop, with approximately 40 participants focused on different models of professional-parent partnerships and the situation of parents defined as 'hard-to-reach', whilst the third workshop, with 54 participants, drew on presentations from different home visiting professionals about the work they did with children and families.

The data presented in this article are drawn from the second workshop where participants were invited to discuss the specific 'partnership practices' they used in engaging with parents and to reflect on potential barriers to parent engagement with the service. The participants comprised around one third from childcare centres, pre-schools and primary schools, one third from the Department of Education and Children's Services, and the remainder from health and welfare services.

The workshops were conducted in university tutorial rooms equipped with computer projectors and screens with participants seated in small groups. They were presented with readings to inform discussion and invited to reflect on the ways in which they engaged with parents (see the [www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinsitute](http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinsitute) website for workshop proceedings and readings). Participants were invited to consider their own workplace-specific practices in

engaging with parents and to consider that practice in the context of the following diagram which maps the power dimensions of the interaction and the strength of the relationship.

**Figure 1.** Practices of parent-professional interaction: influences on partnership (Nichols 2006)



Practitioners' responses and contributions were recorded on PowerPoint slides as they were made and used to stimulate further considerations.

### Findings

Practitioners at the workshop identified a range of different practices with parents consistent with the different services in which they worked. As well as formal structures of parent engagement such as membership of governing bodies, parent meetings or volunteer events, practitioners emphasised the significance of brief informal interchanges and the quality of first contact with families. Daily routine practices such as consistent welcoming messages and continuing contact with parents and children over time helped build confidence in the relationship between parents and services. In childcare and education contexts, handover and pick-up times offered opportunities to exchange information, discuss the child's day and respond to parents' questions.

Workshop participants felt that feedback was a central strategy to build staff skills in relating to parents and in meeting parents' needs.

The frontline staff needs to know clearly what they are allowed to say to families and what is not part of their role. They need feedback about how well they performed and how they could do it differently. Managers need to be aware of how clients are being treated (Participant E Workshop 2).

Feedback and complaints can be given positive spin – ‘if we haven’t got the complaint we can’t improve.’ Naming ‘compliments and complaints’ as part of induction informs parents they have the right to make complaints. Staff need to pass on feedback quickly and follow up by asking ‘Did anyone get back to you?’ You can learn a lot more about the family from a complaint (Participant S Workshop 2)

Childcare services identified with the concept of *partnership on the run* (CCCH, 2005) in contrast to education, family support and health services where parents’ relationships to professionals were institutionalised in the structures which endowed practitioners with formal expertise and power to act on students or clients in particular ways. The workshop discussion intimated the issue of an institutional hierarchy of agencies wherein governance, funding and service emphasis could be determinant of the authorised versions of parent partnership which are present in specific sites. Diverse notions of what could be ‘properly recognised’ as a partnership could operate as impediments to innovative and collaborative practices. In other words, there are risks that the primary managing agency may organise and constrain the ways in which different professionals are supported to engage with families.

As noted in the research literature (Keyes, 2002; Todd, 2003) the potential lack of congruence between the goals of professionals and those of parents could prevent effective partnerships. The outcomes of positive parent engagement could quickly evaporate when staff had concerns for a child’s well-being and sought to raise issues such as hygiene problems, concerns about domestic violence or unpaid accounts. Participants spoke of balancing their responsibility to raise problem issues with parents, knowing that they risked parents withdrawing their children from the service altogether. The possible outcome of the child no longer attending a service, resulting in greater isolation and stress for the family, had to be balanced against the need for protective intervention.

When you meet with a family and want to raise an issue such as payment or health concerns and they ‘bolt’ – they don’t like talking about it and you lose them – sometimes if you want to keep the children in the service, you may decide not to raise the issue (Participant F Workshop 2).

Deal promptly with issues. Don’t leave it. You could be minimising abuse, suicide, depression – even if you risk the family leaving the service (Participant M Workshop 2).

As in the research literature (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1997) service rules and practitioners’ ideas about ideal parent practices shaped the ways in which staff reacted and responded to parents. Parents who presented with attributes and conduct which conformed to idealised norms were able to experience a different quality of relationship with services from those whose presentation and conduct fell outside the preferred normative range. As cautioned by Tett et al. (2003), Milbourne et al. (2003) and Hughes and MacNaughton (2000), professionals’ ideas about appropriate parent conduct or presentation can lead to exclusion, judgement and distrust between parents and services, particularly when there is little opportunity for valuing different family and community practices.

Workshop participants felt that professionals have an obligation to follow up suspected abuse if they hear ‘warning bells’ but parents may want to avoid shaming. Professionals’



expertise and motivation to protect children required them to raise issues of concern, but parents with little time to talk and those who avoided contact with staff presented them with few opportunities to build relationships. In addition, parents' ideas about their child's reactions could lead to professionals feeling blamed by parents, for example when children were upset about attending the service.

Parents look for blame if the child's not settled rather than acknowledging the child has a right to feel that way (Participant R Workshop 2).

Respondents expressed that conflicts could arise, for example, about how the interests of the child were served by the presence of the parent. The parent may need to 'rush off' or want to 'sneak out' whereas the professional may prefer to see more time spent on settling the child and a proper 'goodbye' (example from childcare). On the other hand, parents may want to stay and staff may encourage them to leave (example from pre-school). Staff expectations, young children's anxiety and family norms could all conflict in decisions about when and how parent and child separated.

Consistent with the research literature, practitioners identified ethical reflective practice and team building as critical to sustaining an environment where staff and families felt safe and included in service settings (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1997; Surbeck, 1998).

The dynamics between parents were also significant to practitioners where parent groups featured as part of the service. Parents' experience of the service was mediated by the ways parents interacted and by the individual needs of parents. An example given was dealing with a chronic situation in a supported playgroup setting where the worker needed to support 'a parent with hygiene problems' within the group and also support the group. Workshop participants queried the equality of power between parents and whose circumstances were more important?

We need to be accepting and valuing the uniqueness of each family (Participant P Workshop 2).

Hospitality encompasses much of what we want parents to experience (Participant B Workshop 2).

The data generated by the workshops revealed that professionals felt responsible for ensuring that parents' experiences of their services were positive, except where this was perceived to be against the child's best interests. As the literature identified (CCCH, 2005; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1997; Keyes, 2002; Todd, 2003), professionals' decisions about the child's best interests were driven by professional knowledge, service standards and cultural norms.

## Discussion

The main themes identified by diverse early childhood professionals in reflecting on partnership practices and dimensions of power and control, centred on:

- diverse definitions of 'doing partnership',
- lack of congruence in the goals of parents and the goals of staff,
- professionals' normative ideas about parents and parenting and the risk of exclusion versus the risk of failing to protect children, and
- the need to support the diverse needs of families.

These concerns reflected much of the research literature on the perils and possibilities of partnership (CCCH, 2005; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1997; Martin, et al., 1999; Tett et al., 2003).

Bringing together services working across the fields of family support, primary health, child care and education requires the development of mutual understandings of how different agencies seek to enact partnerships. Individual practitioners may engage individually with parents at their home or at the service, or in groups at the service, or work with groups of children and barely see parents, or work intensively with individual children alongside parents. As Kalyanpur and Harry (1997) argue, building shared staff understandings across the different practitioner perspectives is fundamental to effective partnerships across services.

Managing the discursive struggle over authorised partnership practices at an agency level raises questions of professional hierarchies. For example, where education services may engage in partnerships offering parents opportunities to participate in activities such as volunteering in the canteen or library, helping with school sports, or sitting on the school board, childcare services offer parent partnerships around the day to day detail of sharing routines of children's sleeps, meal times and minor upsets. Negotiating the admissibility and viability of differing partnership practices confirms previous research (Surbeck, 1998) that services need to be active around constructing shared understandings of their partnership activities between each other and with parents.

In contrast to the formal training and experience which practitioners bring to their work with children, parents bring the day to day individual lived experience of their family. Parents' social and cultural capital is a key resource in aligning service practices with community expectations. Orienting parents to the goals and practices of different services within an integrated service site appears a necessary precondition of developing shared goals and understandings between parents and professionals.

Developing cultures of practice where parents learn from each other and are exposed to information about the specific services offered across the early childhood services framework is likely to be an ongoing challenge as children and families move through the services. Further, developing practitioners' skills and knowledge in relating to diverse family cultures, practices and circumstances is likely to be an ongoing project as communities and their needs change. As Timperley (1994) identified, issues such as cultural and language barriers, poverty, isolation and parental health problems present an ongoing need for skills and knowledge development in the practitioner workforce.

The tensions between building positive relationships and trust with parents and the need to intervene when there are concerns about a child's welfare highlight a point of tension in parent partnerships where parents' desire to protect themselves from perceived coercive or adverse responses leads to parents leaving the service. Working in partnership with parents to meet their child's needs presupposes a capacity to maintain the relationship beyond raising difficult issues of concern. As noted by Winkworth et al. (2010), building practitioner skills in communicating with parents in ways which support their continuing engagement with services appears to be critical to meeting the needs of workers in communities with high levels of social disadvantage. Responding to this tension presents a challenge in increasingly diverse societies and demands a shared professional stance of respect for each family's context alongside a readiness to learn from families. The comment by a participating practitioner naming 'hospitality' as a key experience for families opens a pathway for dialogue around how children and parents from diverse cultures, income status

and family forms experience their welcome to the services with which they engage. This may be a fruitful direction for future research in early childhood services.

Providing opportunities through the research for practitioners to reflect on their partnership practices produced a valuable forum to reflect on the various meanings and practices which practitioners bring to their work with children and families. Allowing practitioners to provide their own working definitions of partnership practices opened up the discursive space for a broader, more inclusive definition of partnership which included the qualitative dimensions of trust and sustainability, even where these fell outside formal partnership activities. Time to reflect and to share insights and practice-generated understanding appears to be a fruitful and generative strategy supporting pathways to collaboration and partnerships between practitioners in the early childhood services workforce.

The outcomes of the research process included consultation and networking through the research advisory group and the research activities, professional development resources to assist practitioners' experiences of partnership building, and knowledge generation through increasing understandings of contemporary partnership practices across the field of childcare, education, health and welfare services to children and families.

The challenge will be to structure service integration and agency-parent partnership practices in ways which provide the necessary resources and emphasis that will allow time to develop integrated teams and community relationships – along with a political climate committed to open dialogue and inclusion of families as genuine partners in better futures for children.

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Elspeth McInnes BA Hons1 PhD is a sociologist and Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of South Australia. Elspeth' research includes a focus on early childhood and family support policy and programs in the community sector, with a particular focus on the needs and interests of families experiencing poverty and family violence.

Sue Nichols BA Hons Grad Dip Ed PhD is a teacher and Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of South Australia. Sue's research includes interests in parents' knowledge and networks, literacy education and practitioner inquiry.

The research project into parent partnerships in integrated early childhood services sites emerged from the significant shift in early childhood services provision in South Australia from stand-alone to integrated services provision. This change instigated a practical need to identify how diverse professionals in the early childhood, education health and family support workforces enacted services integration and what professional development initiatives might support workers moving into integrated service sites. Elspeth and Sue share research interests in parents' relationships with services and were successful in gaining grant funds for the research project.

Elspeth's current research activities include evaluation of families' experiences of family support services in the Communities for Children model of service delivery. Sue's current research includes a study of parents' knowledge about children's literacy development. As indicated in the article, possible future research into integrated early childhood services includes questions about parents' and children's experiences of integrated services and their relationships with services professionals.