

## **Building Communities: Begins in the Early Years with Early Childhood Services and Professional Teachers**

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### **Introduction**

This presentation explores the role of building and maintaining networks and communities for healthy personal, family and whānau relationships through early childhood services. Data from New Zealand studies, within early childhood settings, have provided evidence that early childhood services are the 'natural places' for providing links between families within their community. The role that teachers and services can play in building communities is a change from traditional child-centred philosophies, but fits with most teachers understanding and awareness of the need for partnerships with parents and their role as a professional in the community.

Building, supporting and growing communities is often the subject of debate amongst social services and educational agencies, but is less often heard in the 'market place' or political sectors. Where a community does come to the attention of media and political spotlights is when the 'community' is needed to support a function that any particular service or government no longer wishes to have responsibility for. Communities themselves are required to care for those within them, but New Zealand research from childhood geography have demonstrated the changing understanding of 'community' for children and their families, and the different experiences of childhood that children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have from those who grew up in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Undeniably, strong communities and networks support strong families; strong families with less health, social, mental and emotional issues, i.e more resilient. This presentation explores how early childhood teachers, services and training providers can be rethinking early childhood pedagogy, professionalism and practices to assist parents, families and communities in the years ahead. As both New Zealand and Japan have experienced devastating natural disasters in the early months of 2011 the importance of building and maintaining communities across these early years for families will conclude this presentation.

### **Context - Early Childhood Education and natural disasters: the New Zealand experience**

When at 12.51pm on the 22nd of February 2011 Canterbury citizens began to experience what we thought as another one of the more than 8,000 aftershocks we had experienced since the 4th of September 2010 (7.1 magnitude) earthquake, alarm quickly spread as the quake shook the city, buildings, people, animals, lives and emotions in a way that no other shake had. While the 6.3

(magnitude) rating made the quake 'sound' less fearsome than many, the combination of factors involved in this one quake produced devastating consequences for everyone in Canterbury: that is, where the fault is (under the city), the length of time of the shaking (20 seconds), the 'trampoline' effect it produced (up and down as well as side-to-side), and the impact of gravitation forces twice the normal rate.

Since the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February Christchurch has continued to experience repeated aftershocks including; 13 June with a 5.7 followed an hour later by a 6.3. Shocks of magnitude 4+ are regularly felt and locals joke over who can guess correctly which fault line (the September, February or June faults) and what magnitude the shake is each time a significant one is experienced (significant is anything where you have to stop what you're doing!). For those of you from Japan you will know what this difference between shakes means.

No-one in the city and surrounding areas has been untouched – from those who lost loved ones in collapsed buildings, the thousands who have lost homes and work places, to the many thousands who cannot now access community facilities (libraries, swimming pools, halls, places to gather), shopping facilities (including major malls), flush toilets, or travel safely on the roads around the city.

Liquifaction has become the new 'buzz' word in Christchurch and we now all know what it means! The damage to our communities and in the suburbs has been extreme with liquefaction, landslides, and the resulting loss of amenities, such as water, power, and sewerage.

With the basics for safe healthy living no longer available, and nerves and personal safety threatened, local communities responded to those around them quickly and effectively. This was seen in the immediate post-earthquake hours and days where those in the communities immediately turned to each other for help and support. This type of response effort helped to maintain not only residential homes and properties but 'lived communities' – the links, networks and sense of 'belonging' and 'location' that support the social capital of families and maintain resilient and well communities.

Rebecca Solnit (2009), writing about American disasters and the 'extraordinary communities that arise in disaster' (title page), provides a compelling argument that while disasters themselves should never be welcomed, the opportunities that they create for reconceptualising social relations and meaningful work, plus the windows they present for change at all levels of the human existence are not to be ignored. Discussing a range of disasters from the San Francisco 1906 earthquake to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, Solnit (2009) argues that people do not act as selfish individuals, prone to violence, mayhem, violence and looting as is supposed, but rather neighbours turn to one another, strangers become rescuers in the streets and buildings and whole populations turn their gaze to help stricken areas.

This response by others in the community after the Christchurch quakes, while the official local and national government attention was elsewhere, was the most

significant factor in supporting and restoring families and their lives within the suburbs. Neighbours cranked up barbecues and cooked food for the whole street (using the food from freezers and fridges that would otherwise spoil from lack of power), and boiled water on gas rings for those who had no forms of heating sources. Springs which appeared in the middle of lawns and living rooms were plumbed out to the street with signs advertising the free availability of water (in communities where the water mains had burst and no water was available). The 'student army' as they have come to be known, provided hundreds of youthful volunteers who, with shovels in hand, swept through the suburbs, clearing paths, digging residents out of their homes and properties. All of these responses occurred in the following hours and days of the quakes, prior to any national or governmental response. Such actions were the key to personal survival, reconnection of social relationships, and to provide positive hope.

Our Prime Minister John Key, speaking at the memorial day for 22<sup>nd</sup> of February, summed up this situation well:

Many governments sent rescue teams and other personnel to work alongside the New Zealand rescue services, and for that unstinting service, we also today say thank you. Whether it's been an Urban Search and Rescue team, or whether it's been someone taking their neighbour's water containers to be filled, the assistance which has been given to the people of Christchurch has been of enormous practical benefit, and has lifted our spirits when we most needed it. To the Police, the Army, urban search and rescue teams, medical teams, Civil Defence, the farmy army, the student army, and to all those workers toiling so hard to repair the infrastructure we are indebted.

On behalf of all New Zealanders, I say thank you.

We have learned the power not only of individuals who have done more than they ever dreamed they could have, but also the power of a community, whether it's a neighbourhood, a school, a nation or the international community. We have witnessed in these past three weeks the very best of the human spirit. We have seen the coming together of a city, and of a nation. We have learned a lot about our capacity to do good.

There is much talk that ours is a selfish generation, focused only on money and individual gain. What I have seen in our country, and especially here in this city since February 22 puts the lie to that. I have seen people who are resilient, capable, practical and compassionate. New Zealanders have been generous and brave. (Key, 18 March, 2011, Speech to National Memorial Service)

Rebecca MacFie (2011, p. 26-27), in discussing the government's response to the earthquakes in Christchurch, compared the national action to those of the organized localised community groups who have been working door-to-door with citizens in the suburbs. She quoted community leaders as they worried that

the government was focused on 'fixing potholes and pipes', while the community leaders emphasised that the rebuilding of community should take into account the 'soft infrastructure' that goes beyond the pipes. That is, a community is much more than its bricks and mortar (or steel and concrete).

Solnit (2009) argued that civil society survives after disasters because of its ability to muster creativity and resources to meet challenges, that the power, usually held by the elite, is devolved to the people 'on the ground', and that the localised responses demonstrate how as a people we 'desire connection, participation, altruism, and purposefulness' (p. 306). Elsewhere, Duncan, Bowden and Smith (2005) have argued that early childhood education services are the ideal places for supporting families – family resilience, social capital - and overall community well-being (for further discussion see Citizens Preschool and Nursery, 2008; Duncan, 2009; Duncan et al., 2005, 2006a, 2006b), and in times of crisis, big or small, the importance of the early childhood centre, within the community, becomes even more obvious.

### **Research Evidence that ECE contributes to community building**

Research has established that good quality early childhood education can contribute to ameliorating the effects of poverty and risk for children (Barnett, 1998; Smith et al., 2000). It cannot solve the problem of poverty but it can help families and whānau cope with the stresses and challenges of modern day life. Early childhood education should not, however, be considered the only context for intervention with families and whānau in need. It can and should be considered as a valuable part of the solution to the problems facing modern families and whānau that requires a multi-perspectival and multi-sector approach.

Hayden and MacDonald (2001) argue that early childhood centres are well situated to adopt a new role, which moves beyond a child-centred programme focus. They argue that it is time to transcend the traditional discourses that view early childhood centres as support for working parents, as compensatory programmes for children with additional needs (disadvantaged children) and as programmes for developing school readiness. By changing attitudes and policies early childhood services can be reformulated to assume the critical task of developing and facilitating social relationships, networks and interagency collaborations - and take a central role in building communities and civil society. Hayden and MacDonald argue that early childhood centres should be seen as offering a service to the community and that a new discourse be developed that incorporates a community oriented approach to service delivery. This discourse would recognise that many early childhood centres and services help build community connectedness by being a vehicle whereby links, relationships and opportunities for networking develop - both on a micro, personal level between families and early childhood centres, and on a community level between agencies and organisations, early childhood centres and families.

The research that has addressed parent participation in early childhood programmes has begun to demonstrate the positive impact it has on family

members, in addition to the child who is attending. Wylie (1994) in a review of early childhood policy and programmes found that parents involved in early childhood programmes experienced enhanced relationships with their children, alleviation of maternal stress, upgrading of education or training credential, and improved employment status. Wylie, Thompson, and Kerslake Henricks (1996) reported that parents in the *Competent Children at 5* study identified the benefits from being involved in their child's early childhood service as support, friendship and company. For those parents who were the main caregivers of their children, gaining a better understanding of their children and the early childhood programme as well as improving their own skills were identified as benefits.

The current trend internationally in early childhood education is to provide a comprehensive approach that focuses not only on children, but also on their families (OECD, 2001; Powell, 1997). A 'family systems' perspective (St. Pierre & Layzer, 1998) suggests that programmes, which focus only on children, will not produce the best results. Programmes, which are delivered to whole families, are more likely to be effective in breaking the cycle of poverty. Head Start Family Services and programmes such as the *New Chance* and the *Comprehensive Child Development Program* in the US are initiatives, which have focused on the whole family and their multiple needs for services. In an OECD report (2001) reviewing EC provisions in twelve countries the reviewers identified key programmes which linked early childhood centres, parents and communities through meaningful and supportive mechanisms. The authors argued that EC programmes can strengthen and build the social cohesion between families, communities and government and non-governmental sectors. They identified how multi-agency initiatives, incorporating early childhood provisions, more adequately meet the needs of today's parents and when located in areas of high need promote equal educational opportunities without stigmatising individual children (OECD, 2001, p. 84). They offer several international examples of these forms of provision, including England's:

*Early Excellence Centres*, government supported models of exemplary practice, [who] offer a range of integrated services, including early years education for 3-4 year olds, full-day care for children birth to 3 years, drop-in facilities, outreach, family support, health care, adult education and practitioner training. (OECD, 2001, p. 84)

Wigfall (2002) describes the 'one-stop-shop' approach taken by the Coram Community Campus, an innovative model of service provision in inner London, where a range of services for young children and their families, include care, education, health, parent support and other services (for example, a child psychologist and social worker) on one site. This approach was developed in order to overcome the problem of compartmentalisation and fragmentation in traditional children's services, and is based on research supporting the importance of early preventive work with parents in supporting resilience.

While New Zealand has not developed the same range or intensity of fully integrated multi-agency services as in other European countries, there is a

strong philosophy that mainstream early childhood education programmes have a major role in supporting families. The early childhood curriculum guidelines, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996a) has as one of its five major goals, “Belonging” for children and families, which encourages the development of connecting links between early childhood centres and families. “The families of all children should feel that they belong and are able to participate in the early childhood education programme and in decision making” (Ministry of Education, 1996a. p. 54).

A child’s learning and development depend not only on the ECE environment they experience, but also on their home and wider social environment. The coming together of children and families in ECE services provides greater opportunities for addressing health and social issues. Building stronger links between ECE services, ante-natal programmes, parents and whānau, parenting programmes, schools, and health and social services can also improve a child’s educational achievements.

The following data is from a collection of recent research studies that I have engaged in with colleagues, that have all looked at different aspects of how early childhood education and early childhood services support families and build strong communities. Each study was undertaken in teacher-led centre-based settings in New Zealand. More information on these studies is available elsewhere (see: see Citizens Preschool and Nursery, 2008; Duncan, 2009; Duncan et al., 2005, 2006a, 2006b).

### **Networks and Linking with Others**

Both parents and staff of the ECE centres talked about the importance of trusting, caring and stable relationships between early childhood staff and families. As the EC staff identified, the child is part of a family and to build a relationship with the child also means developing a relationship with the carers and the significant people in the life of that child. Actively promoting the family as part of the centre community was an important philosophical goal of the all the ECE centres in these studies Likewise, introducing families to other members of the early childhood community became an important role – both in terms of supporting friendships and links between parents, and introducing referral agencies and support personnel from outside the immediate early childhood community

The staff saw the development of a welcoming and positive environment as essential to supporting families, creating the links between home and centre. This was also endorsed by the advisory and social support agencies, who worked with the centre families, as a major contributor towards decreasing parental levels of anxiety and worry. Almost all of the families identified that their early childhood centre was somewhere they felt their child was safe, and where they felt a sense of belonging for themselves and their child. They, and several support agencies, described their centres as warm, inviting, and friendly.

They are very welcoming. Like when you walk in the gate and you walk in the door they greet every child by name and that child is

made to feel quite special. And my kid, she gets quite embarrassed, but she loves it, absolutely loves it. The fact that someone would single her out and say 'Hello [child's name] you know, that makes her feel quite good, and makes us feel good. Like it makes you feel part of the [centre] really. (Parent #11)

Taking a genuine interest in the lives of family members was a strategy that was identified as helping families feel welcome, supported and safe about leaving their children at the early childhood centre. For example, taking an interest in the activities of children that occur at home and attempting to link these with their experiences at the early childhood centre was a daily practice by the early childhood staff. Similarly, the relationships that the staff had built up with the children was explained as one of the main reasons that the parents felt good about the centre and why other siblings were attending, or had attended, the centre. These relationships took much pressure off parents as they had a place where they could relax about leaving their child, where they knew that the staff understood their child's unique needs and where the environment was safe and designed for children.

But what really convinced me [to leave my child] was the teacher, that was a primary caregiver to [child], picked him up, and gave him a big kiss. And I thought 'I just want someone who is going to love him. Someone who is going to teach him and care for him' ... So it was that feeling it was the right place. He was happy and I was happy. (Parent #7)

The provision of a quality early childhood service was identified by the parents as providing parents and family members with much needed "time out" from parenting demands. Time out from parenting demands while their child was at a centre enabled parents to undertake other tasks that were needed for family functioning, time out from the stresses of parenting and time to meet their own needs. This support not only impacts on the individual, but also on the way the individual interacted with others in the family, for example allowing mothers to rest and then spend more quality time with the child. The support provided by early childhood centres also enabled parents to recharge and look after their own well being so they could better provide for their family. It also allowed parents time to focus on the other family members who may have required special attention (for example, those with special needs and illnesses).

When I was pregnant, it was ... I could sleep every afternoon, knowing that [eldest child] was y'know occupied, busy, safe, having fun, and I wheel [son] home in the buggy. By the time we got home he was ready to be popped into bed, and then I could sleep – every afternoon for two hours. And that was a lifesaver actually, a lifesaver. And to know it was going to happen every afternoon and ... to rest .... And it certainly it meant that the whole family benefited from the fact that I was, had enough energy to keep going for the rest of the day. (Parent #18)

## Turning Isolation into Cohesion and Communication

Community and family isolation can place individuals in a heightened risk situation, and decrease population health and educational achievement (Putnam, 2000). The early childhood centres in this study played an important role in helping to combat the isolation of families in the community and working towards building micro-communities (Scott, 2000). They also offered a safe stable protective environment for families who may live in high-risk situations and community environments. The very nature of just “being there” for families was a major theme recurring through all of the interviews with early childhood staff and families.

There is a sense of being part of the community and meeting other people. You know, you get to meet other people who have got kids the same age to some extent or other and maybe also someone that you can talk to if you are feeling really stressed or freaked out about something in particular and you don't really know where else to turn. (Support Provider #3)

The provision of an early childhood centre in the community was identified by all the participants as a key form of family support. This cannot be over-emphasised in its importance to families and their communities.

Well it's a connection thing really. Just, it makes me feel that, y'know I'm not an island ... I think that anything that makes you feel part of your community, that makes even my sister's family feel part of the flow of what happens in [city], and that involves the kindergarten, the school, the [suburb] shops, the library. They're all as familiar to my niece as they are to my own children. (Parent #18)

We noted that if NO other factor had been identified as important to support families, the mere presence, and availability of the centres in their communities was a major factor in these families' lives.

### **Being part of the community**

#### **Participation as access to the community**

Parents, in the kindergartens, particularly commented on the amount of parent involvement encouraged at kindergarten. Several of the parents saw huge gains and value in being involved in the kindergarten, not only for the benefit of contributing to keeping the kindergarten funded and supported, but in the enjoyment and pride that their children expressed in having their parent/s involved at 'my kindy'.

*Urban Parent:* It's all about that how community-based it is but also that opportunity to – even though it can be a – it's just that need for contribution, you know, physical – you know like whether it's grounds and I think it's kind of good for the kids to see you having that kind of input ...and you know you're welcome.

And:

*Urban Parent:* I like the fact that, you know, we have to do the things like take home the washing or go on those big trips or do fundraising, it kind of brings– you sort of have a greater sense of community... It's less a service and more of a community, that's how I feel about it.

Across the studies we identified that the ECE centres (whether they were kindergartens or childcare centres) have four main structural opportunities that involve parents and develop connections:

1. Dropping off and picking up time
2. Participation in the programme
3. Attending social events
4. Becoming a committee member

Participating in the programme is an important variable in making contacts through the centre. It appears from the reporting of the participants that the level of involvement that parents had within the EC centre greatly affected the amount and type of relationships they developed with other families. For example, those parents who reported that their level of involvement was restricted to dropping their children off and who did not want a great deal of involvement with their EC centre, tended not to report having made friendships or having developed relationships with other families through the EC centre. This was contrasted with others who reported having some, to a considerable amount of, involvement in the centre having formed friendships and relationships with other parents both within the EC centre setting and that also extended beyond that setting.

Walking to, dropping off and picking up children from the EC centre enabled several parents to form acquaintances and friendships with other parents/caregivers:

I have made friends who I wouldn't have met under any other conditions except from the [centre]. And because they live locally, it's very easy to have a true friendship. You start out just chatting and walking together ... and go to their houses, and they come to my house, and it's the children that know each other. It's something that I always thought was important. That you attend the facilities in your neighbourhood. That you don't live here and go to school across town. And it's for those very reasons, it creates, I don't know, a feeling of community, that you count, that you belong, that people notice you, that you notice them. (Parent #18)

Centre organised social events and activities (e.g., fundraisers, working bees, cultural nights, shared meals) appeared to be a successful means of connecting families. These gatherings allowed parents/caregivers to share information and knowledge, discuss issues, raise concerns and seek help. In several cases providing a point of contact and centre for parents to meet with common

interests led to parents/caregivers forming relationships and becoming involved in other activities outside of the EC setting. This was identified as particularly supportive for parents who have difficulty making friendships and who feel they are isolated within their community:

It's kind of like team building, you know like you become a team, a culture in itself. Yeah, and you feel like you are part of that team and you all get together. I mean no-one really wants to come along to watch the kids ride their bikes round the cones, but the kids love it and you go along. Like, it's the same with the garage sale, you know, you end up, it's like camaraderie forms. Quite often, unfortunately it's only a small group, you know you are not talking about 60 parents because you know that never happens but you know it spreads the net. I mean it's essential really, because you sort of, you come in here as an individual, you know and you leave as an individual. Whereas in situations like that you see that you are actually part of a team and it's sort of a bigger group of people and you are all working towards the same aim. You know educating your child, and hopefully your kid has a very nice time while they are here you know. Those things are really important I think. (Parent #11)

In the Citizens Centre of Innovation (a full-time Nursery) they planned family events to ensure communication opportunities for the families. The idea of holding a celebration for families was decided upon by the Citizens team as a way of building on the relationships with Citizens families while enabling families to develop a stronger connection with the centre as a community. These celebrations were held once a year and involved both the Nursery and Preschool. The aim was for families to develop their own connection with the environment where their children spent their days, and to feel that they are part of the family environment of Citizens. The evenings were rolling events from 3.30-6.30 pm so that parents could participate at the time that suited them. Entertainment and activities (bubble machine, story teller, face-painting, clay work) occurred over the time. Food and drinks were always available in both the Preschool and Nursery. The projector screen was set up in the Preschool so parents could watch an ongoing screen show of photos of the children. A teacher went around both centres with the video camera and digital camera capturing moments throughout the evening. The goal of events like the celebration was to build on our relationships with the families and to encourage family participation in the centre, and the first family celebration was a large step forward in meeting this goal.

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

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

For parents who had relocated to areas and had not known people the link through the kindergarten had proven to be a key for their families, both for general friendships but also for those times when family and family members are often depended on for support, such in times of illness or birth of a new baby. For example:

*Urban Parent:* We didn't know – we came here ... but I mean it's like we didn't even know anyone here really and – and we've met so many friendly people, like all our friends now are from the Kindy so. When the baby was born – 'cause I was – it really hit home because so many people came by and, you know, like dropped off, you know, a meal or whatever and the baby was in hospital for a few days and just to support us during that time was – it was amazing ... it was great.

Parents regularly used terms such as 'networking', 'linking' and 'getting to know people' when talking about themselves and their kindergarten, and 'making friends' when talking about their children:

*Urban Parent:* I think there's a re – like there's the sense of community not just – just being part of a family, which I think is important, but the fact that you're networking, you might just walk home with another group of kids, you know, the same direction or ...you might meet up at the park and the kids – kids just feel like they – they know other people. And I mean my childcare, because I don't have family here, are usually my Kindy friends, you know, whereas I didn't even know any of the parents at the childcare centre.

Overwhelming the responses discussed the way in which kindergarten/ECE centre offered parents a way of joining the community, and parents mentioned the friendships they were able to form with other parents at their ECE centre.

### **Being part of a community**

Connecting with the community was repeatedly remarked on by the parents – both rural and urban parents. A good relationship with the wider community of the kindergarten was seen by the teachers as important because of the reputation that it built for the ECE centre. In one study, looking at the experiences of two year-olds in kindergarten, when we asked the parents about the reasons that they had chosen the kindergarten for their child, being part of their local community and building up relationships was a key factor in several of the parents' reasons. All the parents discussed that they had chosen the kindergarten for their child for reasons of making social contacts for their children. They also talked in terms of making friends that they would go to school with later on, and how good it was for the children to form relationships outside of the family. For several of the families they had chosen the kindergarten because of existing links with the community, for example, recommended from Church contacts, or from attending a shared playgroup (Duncan et al., 2006, p. 84).

The discussions from other parents flowed such as in the following example:

*Urban Parent:* But it's more community, I think kindy's more community.

INTERVIEWER: So you like the fact that there's community involvement?

*Urban parent:* Definitely yeah. Well 'cause, you know, I moved up from [name of place] and like you get to meet everybody, aye.

This connecting with others and building links in the community was continually raised by the parents:

*Urban Parent:* In a kindergarten situation you meet others parents and all of a sudden you start, you know, having play dates and stuff after kindy and you help out with each other's children if you can't pick them up.

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These features of the kindergarten, where clusters of parents can meet and at the same times, cannot be underestimated in their important role both for individual families but for the supporting and building of communities, and local social capital (as has been found in other studies, see Duncan, 2006a; Duncan & Bowden, 2004; Duncan, Bowden, & Smith, 2006 a, b, c; Powell, Cullen, Adams, Duncan, & Marshall, K, 2005).

### **Final Thoughts**

From all the studies and the discussion today I offer the following thoughts:

- The support offered by early childhood centres and staff focused on building networks, family links, and micro-communities. How they did this was by:
- Families felt comfortable approaching the early childhood centre and staff;
- The most successful support for families were offered in informal ways, rather than in planned, structured evenings or programmes;
- The early childhood centres were able to reach out to families from an accessible, non-stigmatised setting (unlike *Work & Income*, or other settings that were identified as focusing on family deficits);

- The early childhood centre support was universal and not targeted at a risk group – it was offered to all families, so those who needed it most could avoid feeling targeted and stigmatised;
- Early childhood centre support goals were about supporting children and supporting families from a strengths based model rather than from a deficit or abuse prevention model;

What are the lessons learnt that we can apply to building communities no matter which country we are in:

1) **Bonding** – the early childhood centres provided an environment where families could build ‘close’ relationships/ties with staff and other families that families typically could rely on to get by on a day-to-day basis. How and who can assist this bonding process for families and individuals who are not part of an ECE centre or are in other parts of their life course – moving through school, joining or leaving the workforce etc?

2) **Bridging** – the early childhood centres and staff assisted families in building a diversity of relations across different network types. The early childhood centres introduced families to specialists, health and welfare professionals, primary school teachers and others in the local community that the families can turn to for assistance with particular problems and when they are in need of specific resources. How and who can assist this bonding process for families and individuals? Can our current processes or services continue to do this for the larger numbers of families who are have not bonded in any community?

3) **Linking** – the early childhood centres and staff assisted families in building links with institutions and people of authority. Early childhood centres and staff described that they accompanied families to meetings, acted as advocates, and fostered relationships between families and agencies linked to ‘the system’ (health, welfare, education, employment). Linking individuals into something larger than their own situation – how do we do this respectfully, and authentically? How as a country do we acknowledge the range and variety of communities that provide support for their members? Provide these communities with legitimacy and respect: For example, gay communities?

## **Conclusion**

Solnit (2009) concludes in her description of American disasters and the community responses they provoked:

‘Disaster sometimes knocks down institutions and structures and suspends private life, leaving a broader view of what lies beyond. The task before us is to recognize the possibilities visible through that gateway and endeavor to bring them into the realm of everyday’ (p. 313).

The examples, post earthquake, as responses by our New Zealand early childhood community provide us with examples of how and why individual early

childhood services are the heart of our communities and why, nationally, early childhood education as a sector can stand united and strong for the well-being of our children and their whānau. They have presented us with new possibilities, new ways of organising enrolments, programmes, patterns of attendances, places to play, and places to come together. Maybe, this 'broader view of what lies beyond' our everyday practices may be the beginning of a stronger, more creative, responsive approach to early childhood education in Aotearoa. May we not forget the lessons we've learned over this time.