SUPPORT FOR MOTHERS BY EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Mothers have been involved with early childhood centres since their inception. Apart from obvious benefits for their children this liaison has also been important for mothers through gains in parenting knowledge, increased confidence and personal wellbeing. The present study argues that this is pertinent to appropriate and focused support being crucial for mothers at the life stage of adjustment to early parenting when disruption of networks has occurred. As well, it reflects the responsibility of institutions such as early childhood centres to fulfil these needs in a society where traditional support has fragmented.

The study was designed to explore ways in which support mechanisms operated in four different early childhood services, through the medium of interviews. The unique findings in the study culminated in six propositions that showed support to be a product of mothers' own activity in building relationships and contributing to their centre community. At the same time irrespective of service type all centres operated upon the basis of both formal and informal systems of support. Consequently, whilst mothers' activities were most favoured by socially co-operative environments, they were opportunists in both systems. However, of major concern was that the informal systems were the most effective, as the statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices (Ministry of Education, 1996) exhorts staff to consider parent interactions as partnerships and The Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education (Ministry of Education, 2002) has a vision of socially co-operative practices. Teachers rather than being unwilling to establish more collaborative styles of leadership were hampered by a lack of confidence in working with parents. Difficulties were the consequence of professional attitudes to trained knowledge, unmodified by the benefits of training to facilitate adults. Addressing these issues will not only help teachers to develop more collaborative systems that will facilitate support for mothers, but it will also ensure partnerships that make better use of their services to the mutual benefit of early childhood centre communities.

Dedication:

To my parents who through traumatic and changing times gave me my first experiences in the art of parenting helping to make me what I was before I became what I am.

To mothers everywhere.

Acknowledgements

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GLOSSARY

Centre: Denotes an early childhood service, licensed to provide education and custodial care for children up to age five years. In this study it refers to four types of community based organisations.

Community kindergarten: This is a centre that provides sessional care and education, being a non-profit organisation administered by a management committee within community premises.

Education Review Office (ERO) The government office (established 1989 at the time of educational reforms) that is responsible for evaluating the performance of early childhood centres and schools to ensure continued accountability.

Free kindergarten: This is a centre that operates under the auspices of the Free Kindergarten Association in New Zealand. It is non-profit making and offers sessional education programmes.

Maori: A member of the "tangata whenua" the original people to settle in New Zealand.

Ministry of Education: A government organisation that in 1989 replaced the former Department of Education, and is responsible for ensuring national educational policies are implemented as well as overseeing finances.

Playcentre: This is a centre that operates under the auspices of the New Zealand Playcentre Federation, also a non-profit group it offers training for parents, who manage the centre as a parent-co-operative.

Playgroup: A regular, informal, parent-led initiative where parents meet with their children (usually license exempt). However, in the study because the playgroup operated under the license of a community kindergarten it was subject to review by the Education Review Office (ERO).

Social capital: Resources gained and exchanged through social networks

Statement of Desirable Objectives (DOPs): Articulates the government's expectations (through the Ministry of Education) of early childhood providers in terms of guiding principles and goals.

Te Whaariki   This is a Maori expression, translated it refers to an "interwoven mat" that was selected as the title for the bi-cultural Early Childhood Curriculum document used in licensed early childhood centres (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Teacher: Denotes a qualified person who teaches and has attained the status of a Diploma of Teaching (ECE) and who is employed to teach in an early childhood centre.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

"It takes a whole village to raise a child".
African proverb

1.1   Background to the study

This study developed out of a deep and abiding interest in supporting the struggles of young women in the prime of their lives to become good mothers, and yet keep their sense of self-efficacy. It was a result of many years spent by the author as a kindergarten teacher during which it was impossible not to be impressed by the developmental changes in mothers during the process of their early childhood centre membership, as well as to ponder on how the transition occurred. From this it was a logical step when the opportunity arose to develop a study to examine the scope of the potential contribution of early childhood centres to the support of mothers, in order to better understand the processes involved. With this purpose in mind the following aims were conceived:

- To investigate whether mothers believe they gain any support benefits through being a participant in an early childhood centre.
- To investigate how staff view the centre's role with regard to parental support.
- To explore and document the nature of any perceived support as well as whether it reflects individual changing maternal needs.

The literature, both nationally and internationally documents considerable evidence that early childhood centres are places where mothers gain important benefits for themselves as well as their children (D. Powell, 1989; Powell, Adams, Cullen, Marshall & Duncan, 2005; Renwick, 1985; Smith, Grima, Gaffney, Powell, Masse & Barnett, 2000). At the same time according to Lave and Wenger (1991) the support accessed by mothers is not

static but responsive to their ever changing needs, driven by the development of their child. Powell et al. (2005) believed this operated to such a degree that the benefits may even remain latent and unfold past the period of membership.

1.1.2 Everyday social exchange as the basis of mothers' support

Mothers undoubtedly gain support through everyday exchanges with teachers and other mothers. Urwin (1985) argued similarly that centre relationships are the basis of mothers' support which establishes children as catalysts of their new personal social networks. Likewise Renwick (1985) found early childhood centres were places where mothers met to enjoy companionship. Walker and Riley (2001) demonstrated these exchanges are not to be underestimated as they are crucial to mothers' understanding and the promotion of their learning. In an American study the authors examined the impact of mothers' involvement with their social networks upon their self-reported changes in behaviours and attitudes. They found that the advice of parent programmes is neither accepted nor rejected in a vacuum, but in the context of discussion within mothers' social networks. Walker and Riley used a methodology that entailed mothers reading a series of parent newsletters after which they were surveyed about their habits regarding sharing the information. Findings suggested that the common occurrence in the lives of all the new mothers that affected their learning from the newsletters was the exchange with spouse, family and friends. Walker and Riley believed this to mean that regular discussion within personal networks can be targeted with a view to enhancing parenting practices through natural processes. As these are attractive for mothers the authors called for public policies to respond by strengthening access to informal support agencies. Dawson (1998) illustrated her feelings in this regard in Playcentre's Journal:

> *I recall thinking, well, I'm only here for Courtney...four years later, I was desperately trying to find a way to stay involved in Playcentre. I had made many wonderful friends. I would never have imagined, four years previously, that I could grow in so many ways* (p.7).

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According to Cochran, Larner, Riley, Gunnarson and Henderson (1990) the social connections that mothers experience as a result of centre membership offer potential for support in a world that Kiong (2006) described as representing an increasingly dislocated sense of community. Cochran et al. argued early childhood centres represent communities in themselves, where routine meeting initiates relationship building that is a pre-cursor of friendship. According to the authors, building relationships in early childhood centres has a major advantage because they are local and occur quite naturally, making them easy for mothers to service who have restricted time for socialising and constraints upon mobility. Larner (1997) argued as well that local networks have particular potential for a "good fit", a necessary condition of support, because they are contracted between individuals who share the same community space and therefore have acquaintances and local knowledge in common and even a similar world view. Cochran et al. (1990) believed the outcome of these satisfying social relationships was twofold. Not only did they generate happiness and a sense of fulfilment in mothers' personal lives, but they contributed to enhanced relationships with their children and more effective parenting.

1.1.3   Gaining incremental knowledge as an important aspect of support

The support mothers require for their parenting is incremental, driven by the demands of their child's rapid development that shapes their own growth as a parent as it shifts from stage to stage. D. Powell (1997a) affirmed the potency of support in early childhood centres through the possibilities the exchange of information presents because of its concentration on issues related to parenting at different stages. Mothers are particularly attracted to information through exchanges with their peers because of its authenticity as personal experiences. Having easy access to information is a necessity because, according to Bowman (1997) gaining support needs to involve mothers in an active process. They must be able to select from a range of different options that promote choice and personal control. At the same time mothers require a wide spectrum of knowledge because of the complexity of the task and constant developmental change

(Lave & Wenger, 1991). The need for incremental help is considerably supported by the cyclical nature of early childhood centres that as organisations operate on the basis of novice parents arriving and experienced parents leaving. Rogoff, Goodman Turkanis and Bartlett (2001) believed the unique traditions and cultures that evolved from this process are particularly responsive to the particular group involved.

1.2　The early childhood context in New Zealand

An important factor associated with New Zealand early childhood services is that whilst they all offer support and learning there is high variability in how this occurs. In this regard Dalli (1997) identified centre structures as important deciders of what happens in these centres. In New Zealand where the present study was undertaken this has particular significance because of the extreme diversity of services reflecting their ad hoc development (McLeod, 2002). Centres comprise six major groupings: kindergartens, playcentres, education and care services, home-based services, the Correspondence school and the Kohanga Reo (Ministry of Education, 2000). Services are for children from birth to school entry. For the most part they are community based and run by non-governmental organisations, except for those operated by individuals or companies within private enterprise for profit. The government has some financial interests in property and is party to pay, conditions and negotiation for kindergartens through the State Services Act (Education Review Office, 1997). However, it only gives grants in aid to early childhood centres, apart from the Correspondence School and hospital services (Meade & Podmore, 2002). Early childhood centres have continued to expand, with the latest developments involving 24 hour care in recognition of changing work patterns and family arrangements (Kiong, 2006). As the present study was interested in support for mothers beyond gaining childcare alone, selecting centres for the study purpose was focused on those where children attended for minimum periods rather than throughout the entire week. As a consequence sessional services such as: kindergartens, playcentres and funded playgroups were considered because it was

expected that mothers would have a greater presence there and therefore be more exposed to support opportunities.

1.3   Support as a rationale for the study

The rationale for mothers' needing support is based upon the view that it is the major bulwark against stress that is a feature of modern society (New Zealand Herald, 2006). The life stage of parenthood is particularly identified as vulnerable within the general population, with the mothering role being the most stressful because despite role sharing it is mothers who bear the most responsibility daily for children (Butler, Davie, McLeod, Manley, Paterson & Stewart, 2000; Coddington, 2006). Apart from the impact this has on mothers' own lives, it is also significant for their effectiveness as parents, so that mothers' wellbeing has implications for families as well as the wider society (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). According to Butler et al. the overwhelming experience of becoming a mother and the degree of information required to meet the ever changing demands of the new role have a heavy influence on personal freedom and feelings of self-confidence. As a consequence mothers may be forced into a position of satisfying the needs of their child above their own for a sustained period, during which the requirement for support becomes paramount. Whilst it is recognised that both mothers and fathers have equal responsibility for parenting, mothers were chosen as the focus of the present study because of the particular relationship that their experiences have with their biological role that is reflected in their support needs. K. Powell and J.G. Powell (2001) placed similar emphasis on new parenthood having greater impact on mothers than fathers who as a consequence suffer vulnerable health as well as career, income and social network interruption. Coddington (2006) argued likewise that despite societal change mothers still hold primary responsibility as caregivers of their children.

In discussing these ideas it is expedient to draw upon the theories that underpin the social world. Theories show relationships that make it possible to organise and integrate existing information into a coherent whole. However, no theory is able to account for all

aspects of human development so that many problems and issues benefit from the application of several different theoretical perspectives. This was the case in this particular study where rather than there being a central theory, a combination was better able to explain the course and cause of outcomes. One of the underpinning theories is Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective that stresses the importance of understanding the relationship between the organism and various environmental systems such as family and community. This is central to the study in the way that relationships are developed between mothers' personal networks within centre communities as well as interconnections with the local neighbourhood. In addition the chronosystem emphasises that the ecology of the individual is never static whereby development involves the interaction of a changing individual with an ever altering matrix of ecological systems. Through this knowledge it has been established that parent involvement is a necessary part of child achievement as well as being beneficial for parents themselves. At the same time intervention initiatives have shown this to be both more effective, as well as more enduring when programmes are conducted as part of the naturally occurring networks of families. Whilst this has sparked the establishment of a range of programmes around the nuclei of early childhood centres, exemplified in New Zealand by the Centres of Innovation (Meade, 2005) it has also strongly affected local early childhood centres. Centres have experienced a shift from casual involvement of mothers in early childhood centres to it being part of legislated requirements.

A further explanation of mothers' life-stage adaptation is inherent in the lifespan theory that recognises development is a process that continues throughout the life cycle (Baltes, 1987). The biological maturational aspect of this theory is particularly relevant in women's adjustment to motherhood. Mothers' experiences as learners likewise illustrate co-constructionist theory that emphasises the impact of social and cultural factors on all development. The theory asserts two main principles that knowledge rather than being passively assimilated by the learner is actively built up through the construction of meaning (Rogoff, 1994).

Support whilst an ongoing basic human need, is of particular consequence at life-stages, specifically at the onset of parenting (Kiong, 2006). Cochran et al. (1990) believed support rather than being haphazard was the consequence of the active process of previous careful provision of appropriate personal networks. However, at life-stage changes vulnerability occurs because whilst not unexpected it frequently amounts to a far greater need for resources than was ever anticipated. The idea that adults continue to adapt to their environment is inherent in lifespan theory. In contrast with traditional views that equate development with the period of infancy through to adolescence it recognised that development is a process that continues throughout the life cycle through to old age (Baltes, 1987). The unique focus of this perspective is on tracing the ways in which people grow and change over the life course where at all points of development the individual is susceptible to change. Lifespan theory defines three sets of cause: *normative* age graded events that are typical and occur at roughly similar times, *non-normative* events such as the life changes precipitated by divorce or job loss and *cohort effects* where groups share the same set of historical experiences as for instance when born under a regime of war (Caspi, Elder & Bem, 1987). Women's adjustment to motherhood is compatible with normative events, associated with biological and maturational experiences that whilst conventional are still traumatic. Cochran et al. demonstrated the major antidote to the difficulties mothers face at this time is the replenishment of redundant personal networks. Whilst Cochran et al. related these actions to a natural response they recognised building and maintaining relationships is an energetic task, not easily accommodated during a life period characterised by constraints on mobility and time. For these reasons it is logical to suppose that early childhood services represent an ideal community for network building, where mothers can exchange mutual experiences with other parents and re-organise their support base within a close radius of home.

The idea that mothers require support is not a new concept. In the United States it has become increasingly recognised since the 1960s when intervention programmes such as Headstart began to merge the care-giving and educational decision-making responsibilities of parents and teachers (Coleman, 1997). It was through involvement in

these programmes that Urie Bronfenbrenner developed an interest in research about the inter-relatedness of families and communities that placed emphasis on the importance of parent participation in family intervention, from which developed his ecological perspective (1979). This viewpoint stresses the importance of understanding the relationships between the individual and various environmental systems, in the present context the mother, her child and the early childhood community. It also has an interest in the relationships amongst the environmental systems, focused in this study on the early childhood centres and their immediate communities. An important aspect of the ecological perspective is that systems and relationships can change over the course of development. The way in which social networks act as channels of communication that help people identify the human and material resources they need, as well as share and carry information from one setting to another has been recognised by researchers, policy makers and educators. However, whilst as a consequence a succession of parenting programmes have emerged they have always required a commitment to activities outside parents' usual routines, as well as attracting a particular sector of parents.

Walker and Riley (2001) argued the more recent shift to helping parents within their naturally occurring networks is an important advance. In this regard early childhood centres have been recognised as significant places for these transmissions. However, wherever these measures have been effective they are testament to a considerable investment in establishing infrastructures, training staff and significant budgets, as recognised by Bertram and Pascal (2000) in an evaluation of the Early Excellence Centres in Birmingham England. These programmes, of which Pen Green is an example (Whalley, 2002) are important in terms of this study because they represent genuine attempts to focus on the personal needs of mothers as well as their children. Whilst other British programmes like Pen Green (Whalley, 2002) and Sure Start (Wiggins, Rosato, Austerberry, Sawtell and Oliver, 2005) have set out to include parents in collaborative ways within early childhood programmes with undoubted benefits, aims have still been child-focused rather than in recognition of mothers' personal needs. Apart from the new focus being an impetus for enhancement programmes it has also driven government policy in the United Kingdom.

1.3.1 Family support enshrined in legislation

Meade and Podmore (2002) in a New Zealand case study, traced policy initiatives beginning in the 1980s that reflected the changing model worldwide to moving beyond the provision of pre-school education for the child alone, to care and support for families. An important provision in the early 1990s was *The Early Childhood Curriculum, Te Whaariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996a). Based upon a bicultural model Te Whaariki acknowledges the cultural heritage of both partners to the Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document of New Zealand. Intrinsic to this document are exhortations to involve and empower families as well as make links with the community. Whilst the Curriculum is not compulsory, the subsequent *Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs)* document (MOE, 1996b) that contains the discourse of Te Whaariki is mandatory for chartered early childhood centres. Although, Nuttall (2005) identifies one of the initiatives stated in the Strategic Plan *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki* (MOE, 2002) is the Government's intention to legislate Te Whaariki. Importantly for the present study, in this document, teachers were required to consider staff-parent interactions as partnerships. Further to this *The Quality Journey: He Haeranga Whai Hua* (MOE, 2000) was designed to assist centres to develop their own review systems that included a focus on teaching learning and development that informed and involved parents as well as teachers. A further publication, the early childhood strategic plan, *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki* (MOE, 2002) has focused amongst other things on empowerment as well as a commitment to training, educational and employment needs of parents. The ultimate aim is expressed in a vision for collaborative relationships.

Another influential aspect of parents' involvement in all sectors of education has been the devolution of central government control to local management that has provided increased impetus for the inclusion of parents in responsible roles (McMillan, 1996). However, whilst this has led to increased empowerment for parents in how their local centres operate, it has been appraised by McMillan as having occurred with little regard to supporting them to accomplish it successfully. He believed whilst much of the burden

to implement change has fallen upon teachers there are concerns in this regard that whilst they have been enthused and encouraged by a continuous flow of documentation, inclusion of parents in true partnerships has remained illusive. The reason for this according to Wenger (1999) is the complex task of implementation. It is related both to difficulties associated with interpretation of written, non-prescriptive guidelines as well as teachers' lack of training to facilitate adults. Whalley (2002) argued even when there is much goodwill and collaborative intentions these are fraught with the inherent difficulties of trying to implement systems that involve a power differential without external support.

1.4   The methodological approach

Support is the major bulwark against the stress mothers experience at the life stage of early parenthood. As the outcome of relationships it entails taking active measures to establish these in the face of developmentally-driven child demands. Early childhood centres represent ideal communities for this task and the all important exchange of appropriate incremental information. As the consequence of a systemic focus, centres have been required by legislation to move beyond earlier sole provision of child-focused education to supporting and empowering families through the establishment of mandatory practices. The intended vehicle for this purpose is partnerships with parents. However, whilst it has been enthusiastically received by the early childhood profession for the ideals it promotes, implementation of collaborative processes remain at an ideological level. The challenge presently is:

> *Working with parents is not a good thing because the legislation says so, but because it is good for the children. I would take it a step further and say it is twofold, good for the children but good for the parents* (Braun, 1992, p.81).

The aim of the study was identifying ways mothers gained support from early childhood centres. In order to conduct the study a qualitative methodology was chosen as the most

appropriate research design because of the need to gain an in-depth view of the ideas and perceptions of participants rather than to focus on statistical outcomes (Neuman, 2003). Mothers' views were the main focus because whilst their support has been written about, this has usually been from the perspective of educators rather than their own (Fleer, 2001). Therefore, in accordance with the view of Tolich and Davidson (2003) that phenomena need to be considered from several positions, both teachers and mothers were interviewed from four different service types. The rationale for the selection of these is discussed later in chapter three.

The present study was undertaken because of the author's particular interest in maternal support as a result of a background in early childhood education. However, Davidson and Tolich (2003) cautioned that whilst inside knowledge can be an advantage it is important to keep an open mind and avoid pre-conceived notions that can cloud judgement. Neuman (2003) argued likewise that this constitutes the approach most likely to yield the hoped for serendipitous findings sought in qualitative design. Whilst the study did not hold to a true grounded theory approach, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) it did embrace the concept that theory generated by qualitative research first emerges from and is then organised around a growing explanation of the findings. The development of the research design is explained in more detail in chapter three.

1.5   Organisation of the research report

The report is presented in eight chapters with appendices. Chapter one provides some insights and background to the study. Chapter two reviews the literature from both a national as well as an international perspective that impacts on the area of interest culminating in a justification for the research questions. It moves from an historical account to recent initiatives in the field that encompass endeavours to support mothers in the early years of parenthood. Chapter three provides a rationale for the study design and subsequent chapters four and five document the results within the framework of

propositions that culminated from the analysis of data. These findings are discussed in chapters six and seven that lead to a conclusion with recommendations in chapter eight.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Parameters of the literature search

Appropriate literature was reviewed in order to inform the study, both at commencement as well as during the analysis of data as new concepts emerged during the iterative process and required further investigation. Whilst the study was undertaken within a New Zealand context, literature was sourced both nationally as well as internationally in the interest of identifying worldwide trends. As the aims of the study were to explore support for mothers through early childhood centres the main focus was on parenting in the early years. Whilst this was identified as the major category for a literature search, initially there was a much wider field of investigation in order to explore the nature of support as a construct, as well as how it was viewed through the different perspectives of teachers and mothers. The search began by listing a number of key words used in the common idiom: *support, stress, coping strategies, parent support, motherhood, maternal support, early childhood services, support and policy and parent education.* Keywords were then adjusted according to the yield of appropriate information. As a consequence literature was drawn from a wide field across: sociology, psychology, education, health, history, government policies and community services.

Once a selection had been made of major sources, relevant literature was examined and specifically categorised to provide a framework for the study according to what was known about the study area in the initial stages. The literature review forms the basis of chapter two and includes a discussion on societal and theoretical influences as well as references to specific studies, intervention programmes and policy documents. Whilst the study was not strongly theory driven, being based upon the grounded theory approach devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967) it was underpinned by an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that has been further elaborated upon in chapter three.

This chapter begins with an historical overview that sets mothers' association with early childhood services in context. It is followed by an explanation of the principles of support and coping mechanisms with a particular focus on life stage needs for mothers of young children. Relationships of diverse kinds are identified as the catalysts of support and these are explored relative to early childhood services. The review concludes with a discussion about support being an active process contingent upon a socially co-operative climate that has implications for the different perceptions held about support by mothers and teachers.

2.2 Historical perspectives: the development of early childhood services and family involvement

In order to place the study *Support for Mothers through Early Childhood Centres* in context the literature was first reviewed from an historical perspective. There were indications that there was a lengthy association within New Zealand, as well as worldwide, between families and early childhood settings where parents, (particularly mothers) have been receiving help and advice one way and another ever since their inception (Larner, 1997). Early childhood services originated from ideas accumulated at the end of the 19th century that focused on the spontaneous development of young children (May, 1997). May provides a more detailed account of the emergence of the different service types of the period. At this time both professionals and parents began not only to have a growing interest in the latest developmental literature, but to be influenced by the idea that parenting is not an inborn capacity. These services therefore became ideal places to disseminate developmental literature particularly to mothers who were not employed outside the home. In this way early childhood services were perceived as serving both parents and children, although benefits were mainly focused on the child and constituted education rather than support (D. Powell, 1997b).

Following the groundbreaking ideas of Bronfenbrenner (1979) it was ascertained that the development and education of children must be addressed within the total context of

their family, school and community. From then on the idea of parents needing education and eventually other types of support escalated (Meade & Podmore, 2002). One of the obvious sectors to pick up on these ideas was that of the preschool, where parenting begins and initial dependency of children means a greater access to parents occurs than in other sectors (Larner, 1997). However, despite parent support and education being almost universally acknowledged by this time, the way it was accomplished in practice was not explored. Consequently its development has largely proceeded as a separate entity within these contexts (White and Woollett, 1993).

2.2.1 Early definitions of parent support and education

Parent education and support whilst from a casual beginning has gradually become more commonplace as a worldwide trend. However, initially according to D. Powell (1997b) writing from an American perspective, there were different experiences for mothers who worked outside the home and those who did not. (For a full account of these developments refer to a New Zealand case study by Meade & Podmore, 2002). These authors argued the early decades of the twentieth century were characterised by social policies and public opinion that operated to keep mothers at home with their children, so that those who used childcare were discriminated against. Whereas the former were credited with valuable childrearing skills and being capable of educating themselves, mothers of pre-dominantly low socio-economic status, who needed to use childcare, were deemed irresponsible and censured for inadequate childrearing philosophies. At the same time this was compounded by the negativity associated with childcare institutions that were distinctly custodial, with facilities that were frequently less than satisfactory (for a more detailed analysis of this period refer to May, 1997). May described the 70s as a period when childcare began to make the transition through radical change as educated, middle class women increasingly became members of the workforce, particularly in professions where previously there had been limited entry. As a growing endorsement of the women's movement, there was an increased demand for

childcare. At the same time the women advocating for this were better equipped to argue for improved care and educational benefits in these services.

2.2.2 Landmarks in provision and the development of social policy towards a unity model of early childhood services

A landmark initiative that spearheaded provision of better early childhood care in New Zealand was The Hill Report (Department of Education, 1971) that recommended pre-school organisations have an educational focus as well as establishing networks. Following this a National Advisory Council on pre-school education was set up to act as a forum of discussion as to how this could be implemented (Meade, 1988). Outcomes included the melding of the amorphous group of services providing childcare at that time, as well as increased networking between centres, improved service standards and professional development. One of the earlier initiatives that helped fulfil these purposes was the establishment of the New Zealand Childcare Association in 1973. Following this a continual series of increments and grants were offered to facilitate the processes, firstly through Social Welfare and more latterly the Education Department. These resulted in radical change throughout the sector that eventually culminated in government amalgamation of all services under the auspices of early childhood education, thereby integrating care and education under the same jurisdiction.

An important aspect of the reforms undertaken was improved training for staff. The latter constituted a system of points and all relevant staff qualifications from diverse sources were gradually accredited to an "Equivalency" with the three year benchmark of the Early Childhood Diploma level for kindergarten teachers (White & Woollett, 1993). Since that period there has been continued momentum towards all teaching personnel in early childhood centres achieving Diploma status. There are targets to meet this goal to which end the government has introduced incentive grants, Teach NZ Scholarships, Study Grants and a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) programme (MOE, 2005). Candidates with partial or related qualifications are invited to take advantage of the RPL

by applying to have their present skills and knowledge assessed. Where these match the learning outcomes of teacher programmes credit may be given for some portions of the Diploma. These measures are focused towards a training objective stated in the Strategic Plan (MOE, 2002) where all people working in regulated (ratio) positions in teacher-led early childhood services will be registered teachers holding a recognised early childhood qualification by 2012 (MOE, 2005).

2.2.3 Development of Te Whaariki, the Early Childhood Curriculum and de-centralised policies involving local communities in centre management

A significant development as part of the reforms undertaken to improve the quality of early childhood education in New Zealand was the Early Childhood Curriculum document, Te Whaariki (MOE, 1996a). The document was the result of a lengthy consultation process that included overseas input from educationalists in a number of countries where the idea of national curriculum statements were also being considered (May & Carr, 1996). Early during the development process Lee (1996) identified parent involvement as a key priority, arguing that resources needed to be developed that would make the Curriculum more engaging for them. Te Whaariki was important because of its intention to embrace a diverse range of early childhood services and cultural perspectives as well as articulate quality practices. It was also timely in connecting with the new national curriculum for schools (May & Carr, 1996). Te Whaariki continues to have particular relevance for the recognition it gives to parenting practice within a uniquely bicultural context that upholds the right of individual groups to translate the document into their own requirements (Smith, 1995). It is in keeping with the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document of New Zealand that established a partnership between the original inhabitants of New Zealand, the Maori, and representatives of the British Crown (Ritchie, 2001). In this context the contribution made by the Kohanga Reo movement to early childhood education needs to be acknowledged. The Kohanga Reo is an entirely Maori initiative, that as well as having a child focus is a socio-political force that has set out to revitalise and reinstate the

language and culture of the Maori. According to Ritchie Maori pedagogy is a process of intergenerational transmission through key personnel, the kaumatua, who are holders of the wisdom of the iwi (tribe). Initially the movement had such a phenomenal growth that it gave considerable impetus to early childhood education as a whole. But, as well it represents a particular support value for families by promoting learning through a cultural context that has a particular basis for collectivism by promoting the values of group relationships and co-operation (Ritchie, 2001). Reedy (1996) acknowledged the importance of Te Whaariki in encouraging the transmission of cultural values that empower children by attending to their holistic development and the effect of the total development upon their futures. In this, the international work of Vygotsky (1978) is upheld, supporting the view that a close cultural match is necessary for the support and learning of both children and adults. D. Powell (1998) an American author, after conducting a review of research literature that set out to offer guidance on how early childhood programmes might strengthen ties with parents, placed the same emphasis on congruence between the proposed programme and the family if there is to be similarity in child rearing values, goals, expectations, language and relationships. Te Whaariki promotes the idea of such conditions through strong links between families and early childhood programmes.

Apart from families being increasingly better served by an improved quality of childcare through the reforms undertaken in education, they also became more involved in shaping them. This was as a result of major administrative changes that occurred at the time within the education system that saw the devolution of services from centralised government to local jurisdiction (Meade & Podmore, 2002). McMillan (1996) also documented these educational changes from a New Zealand perspective, in a workshop address at the University of Otago. He believed they reflected a new social order where the purposes of schooling were defined much more sharply in terms of the potential benefits to the economy rather than to the social life of society. In practice the move towards devolving control with the intention of building partnerships within communities has required considerable adjustment. D. Powell (1996) in two workshop addresses delivered in New Zealand believed the concept of partnership has not been

realised on a widespread basis. He argued this was due to the uneasiness experienced by the partners involved as stemming from "a paradoxical state of affairs" (p.1). Powell summarised this as a consolidated belief that environments that support common goals for young children need to bring together parents and teachers because of the profound benefits for children. But at the same time partnerships between these two groups are difficult because of imprecise definitions of the relationships as well as problems reconciling teachers' trained and parents' lay knowledge. McMillan believed in any case the concept of partnership had been problematic from the outset in New Zealand as a concept that was largely thrust upon early childhood communities as well as Ministry staff. As a result much goodwill was required to sustain the quick response that the changed circumstances warranted. McMillan argued whilst provision was made by the Ministry of Education through dissemination and intervention this was not enough to support the radical change that needed to occur. At the same time it represented a further benchmark for the recognition that parents needed training and support if for nothing else than performing these functions.

One of the ways it was intended that parents would have the support they required to fulfil these duties was through the charter system. Centres were required to record their centre operation in a charter document included in which were indicators of how they would support parents, and provide educational forums within their curriculum. Subsequently this information was formalised and continued to develop under the scrutiny of the Education Review Office (ERO). An important feature of these actions was the way they were left very much to the discretion of individual centres in order to be sensitive to unique local requirements. However, whilst a serious attempt was made to follow Ministry directives, there were difficulties associated with implementing it in practice, so that much of the charter work was eventually detailed by staff rather than in partnership with parents. Farquhar (1991) highlighted some of these problems in New Zealand as the consequence of the unavailability of people for decision making and making appropriate links between requirements and implementation of practice. In considering the staff-parent relationship in an American context D. Powell (1996) believed it always rests on an uneasy alliance. However, highlighting partnership is still

desirable, because it has continued to mitigate operations whereas before it was ignored. As a consequence of reforms, parents have at least become more prominent in the running of community based education making financial and policy decisions alongside the staff, leading to their increased visibility in early childhood. The next part of the chapter discusses the degree to which parents are able to participate according to the different service types.

2.3   The diversity of New Zealand early childhood services

In order to consider the degree to which the more recent innovations for the inclusion of parents have permeated services it is necessary to consider the extreme diversity that exists in early childhood services in New Zealand. According to McLeod (2002) it has occurred as the consequence of ad hoc development in response to particular needs. However, it is an important consideration in the context of the study because Dalli (1997) argued centre structures are almost solely responsible for determining their type of operation. In the study it was intended to make a selection of services where mothers would be expected to have the most presence and therefore be exposed to greater opportunities for support.

Despite melding of the early childhood sectors of education and care in New Zealand they still constitute three main licensed and chartered groups: Playcentre, Kindergarten and Childcare. Consideration of major service models illustrates the degree of potential parental participation in each. Playcentre has traditionally operated entirely on the principle of parent leadership and involvement, with adult participation involving all parents, supervisors and adult helpers (Powell et al., 2005). Densem (1980) described the main objective of these centres as follows: "Children reach their full potential most successfully when parents understand their development, and take part in the learning process...the basis of successful child education is the continuing education of parents," (p.10). Adherence to this maxim has required Playcentre parents to undertake formal training for diplomas to provide qualified staff for these centres as part of their contract.

As a result, the Playcentre structure is unique in that there is no actual division into parent and professional roles. According to McMillan (1996) the innovatory work of Playcentre in establishing true parent co-operatives has been a significant component of parent involvement in early childhood education. However, the full scale parental input has rendered Playcentre membership a non-viable option for many mothers whose other commitments preclude this degree of involvement, so that in more recent times there has been a marked decline in parent numbers (K. Powell et al., 2005).

Another type of early childhood community that resembles the Playcentre model in the way mothers remain throughout sessions is the Playgroup. However, as these operations generally reside within a license exempt category, they are not subject to the same conformities. By government regulations, playgroups do not require a license providing they meet the conditions outlined in an official notice in the Education Gazette, 15th February, 1991 (MOE, 2006b). Robinson (2005) reported the existence of three main Playgroup types: General, Puna Kohungahunga/whanau Maori and Pacific Island Early Childhood Groups. Robinson found that whilst some general playgroups did go on to become licensed and chartered services they still retained the integrity of parent provision and aims of a play and learning environment for their child. The potentiality for parent involvement in playgroups led to the inclusion of one in the present study. It was advantageous that the particular general Playgroup selected operated under the auspices of a community kindergarten. As a consequence it was subject to the same quality control and therefore a more useful comparison than a license-exempt centre would have been.

Community kindergartens (like the one providing the umbrella organisation to the Playgroup in the study) typically also have a relatively high degree of parental participation as a result of their origins. Traditionally part of the childcare sector they frequently owe their establishment to the foresight and co-operation of individuals and community groups that originally operated on the basis of financial independence (White & Woollett, 1993). In contrast with the high degree of parental involvement in these community initiatives, whilst the New Zealand Kindergarten movement has

always welcomed parents, it has been within a framework that identifies a division between trained educational staff, and untrained volunteers. It considers parent support needs within an educational focus that includes dissemination of information through notices and newsletters as well as formal seminars. Despite the structural diversity in the centres described they all represent sessional services that offer degrees of potential for maternal involvement that would not be expected in full daycare. Here, in deference to its purpose, parents necessarily have a low profile and whilst services currently operate educationally focused programmes and enhanced standards of care, they still reflect their traditional custodial origins. As much younger children are involved for lengthy periods there is a more intense focus on their needs in terms of sleeping and eating and care so that staff have to give as much attention to this as to the educational programme. As a consequence they are more likely to be viewed primarily as "carers" as well as have fewer qualifications than staff in other services. Whilst full daycare models of parent involvement show degrees of variation, generally speaking, there is less participation and interactions with parents are much more likely to be confined to brief exchanges (Farquhar, 1991).

2.4 The wider parent education movement as a development of early intervention

So far parent support has been considered as a feature of the particular capacities of early childhood services. However, the following discussion places it in the much wider context of education and support that has developed as a worldwide trend, through the impetus of forces embedded in social and political change (Podmore & Bird, 1991). In this way the far reaching consequences may be seen of the scatter down effects of distant theories to influence local trends.

The development of parent education as a component of specific programmes of any prescription owes its origins largely to the optimism that arose in the 1960s and set out to address social issues of human rights, equity, and mental retardation. Education was

hailed as a major aspect of this, particularly in the effort to improve the chances of lower socio-economic groups where these conditions were most prevalent. Headstart (Zigler, 1979) in the United States was a major antecedent with regard to educational early intervention programmes. As a strategy it was aimed at engaging with the home setting in order to improve chances for children deemed "at risk" for mental retardation. However, although outcomes for children were sometimes inconclusive, success was repeatedly more convincing when parents were involved, particularly at higher levels of decision making about the programme (Galinsky & Friedman, 1992). However, most revealing in the context of this study were parents' reported personal gains of increased feelings of mastery, satisfaction with life and decreased depressive symptoms (Lamb-Parker, Piotrkowski & Peay, 1987). The success of these findings has been responsible for the increased promotion of multiple programme goals that recognise the importance of parental participation at all levels of planning, policy, and implementation.

2.4.1 Parents as First Teachers programme in New Zealand

Another American programme that holds significance in the promotion of parent education and support in New Zealand is New Parents as Teachers (NPAT), sponsored by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Pfannenstiel & Seltzer, 1989). The importance of this initiative was that NPAT was an enhancement programme rather than one targeting "at risk" families. As such it acknowledged that child rearing difficulties are not entirely confined to deficit environments, recognising that any parenting is stressful (Hewitson, 2000). The New Zealand adaptation of the programme was entitled Parents as First Teachers (PAFT) and the home-based delivery first operated as a pilot study under the auspices of the preschool Plunket Service. As with any imposed programme there was early controversy (Walker & Riley, 2001). Farquhar (2003) believed it arose in relationship to: programme origins, competition with funding, lack of consultation with the early childhood education sector and seeming reinforcement of mothers in the home.

In addition to concerns about the delivery the initial evaluation of the pilot programmes conducted jointly by the Universities of Auckland and Otago showed inconclusive evidence of its effectiveness (Farquhar, 2003). However, Farquhar attributed this to the use of quantitative measures in the original evaluation. She argued in the interim period there has been a growth of awareness that these are less useful when applied to human behaviour. Subsequent deliveries of the programme that now better accommodates New Zealand conditions have been more successful. Significant in this was the transference from the Plunket Society to Early Childhood Development (Farquhar, 2003). According to Hunn and Cullen (2000) the shift to an educational focus was an important factor in addressing the initial resistance to the programme. The improved achievements of the more recent programme have been reflected in a qualitative evaluation by Farquhar (2003). Commissioned by Early Childhood Development Wellington it responded to the urgent need for research about the current programme. A presentation of findings from 400 family exit survey forms revealed far more optimism regarding the present version with a major outcome that success is contingent upon significant relationships between educators and parents. The call for further study into this relationship as well as the behaviours, skills and attributes of parent educators fits well with the intent of the present study.

2.4.2 Supporting families by targeting naturally occurring networks

Whilst PAFT is an example of a home-based programme, interventions may also be centre-based as in an early childhood centre or hospital setting (Bertram & Pascal, 2000). However, whilst such programmes have merit, they are at best interventions with limitations. These reside in their imposed regimes, artificial time frames and reliance on parent motivation as well as being a "top down" effect that implies they offer greater value than that which presently exists within the home. For these reasons irrespective of professional attempts to provide "a good fit" in terms of matching programmes to particular cultural and socio-economic contexts, they can never approximate the support potential in naturally occurring systems exemplified here by early childhood centres

(Cochran, et al., 1990). Cochran et al. came to these conclusions after conducting a 10 year co-operative study as part of the Comparative Ecology of Human Development Project at Cornell University. The project set out to discover how personal networks evolve through the use of a standardised measure, the Friendship Network Circle Activity (FNCA). It explored structural (size and intimacy) and relational (status of friendships) links in personal networks. Amongst other things the findings highlighted the more recent shift in thinking that attempts to capitalise on natural processes in order to enhance family support. Not only does this eliminate many of the problems inherent in imposed regimes but also it represents a more constructive view of what families are already able to do, rather than attempting to devalue the existing ecology by total replacement. As a consequence of the study Cochran et al. called for early childhood services to encourage parental friendship both in and outside the classroom, as well as for public policies to strengthen access to informal support agencies.

The more recent trend in intervention programmes to capitalising on what is already happening in existing ecologies has been consequential to increased success in these models for parent participation, as well as enduring effects. The latter, whilst often an elusive goal of traditional interventions was a focus of an American study conducted by Albritton, Klotz and Roberson (2003). The authors conducted an investigation of the degree to which Mississippi's Parents as Teachers (PAT) programme was advancing parent involvement in children's learning. As a consequence Albritton et al. found that a major success was established through connecting parents with services in the community that were beyond the scope of the programme. As these were part of naturally occurring networks they were responsible for maintaining positive effects long after the intervention had finished.

2.4.3 Support through multi-agency and co-ordinated children's services

A successful way of building the type of community network that takes advantage of naturally occurring ecologies is through co-ordination of services built on a multi-agency approach around the nucleus of already established schools and pre-schools. One of these initiatives established by the British government is the Early Excellence Centres (EECs). In an early evaluation of the pilot programme Bertram and Pascal (2000) rated its competence as residing in the delivery of high quality educational opportunities for children and adults, through employment of well-qualified early education and other multi-agency staff. The authors assessed the services to have potential for impacting strongly on the lives of families. However, at the same time the complexity of co-ordinating and financing such complex initiatives and the time it takes for facilitators to develop necessary skills puts such undertakings beyond the scope of individual centres. The same components of potential success have been included in Sure Start another British initiative that pulls together health and education and welfare services for families with children 0-3 in a co-ordinated way in order to address child poverty and social exclusion (Roberts & Hall, 2006). Early evaluations suggest that whilst some areas need attention in order to increase effectiveness there is a general optimism regarding outcomes (Wiggins, Rosato, Austerberry, Sawtell & Oliver, 2006).

2.4.4 New Zealand family support initiatives

Whilst successful support initiatives have often relied on expensive infrastructures this does not mean that worthwhile enterprises cannot develop otherwise. In New Zealand this is illustrated by the New Zealand Centres of Innovation (COI) as well as the Playcentre Federation. COI's are a recent government initiative where selected centres work with researchers to undertake action research related to their innovation in teaching and learning as well as share outcomes and link with family health and social services (Meade, 2005). From the late 1940s and early 1950s the Playcentre Federation has demonstrated over a lengthy period how individual centres within an established

framework along with parent education and self-determination can also be an effective model for establishing long-term community links (McMillan, 1996). Whilst there is anecdotal evidence for the success of Playcentre as a community network, this has recently been confirmed in a study that was the result of a contract between the New Zealand Playcentre Federation and Massey University. The project was undertaken in two phases. It embodied a national survey and case studies with the latter highlighting the issues of adult participation and impact on social capital from the perspectives of Playcentre members (Powell et al., 2005). Outcomes demonstrated a high degree of contribution by parents through collaboration with and support from other adults. At the same time benefits were not confined to centres but extended into valuable links with the community as well as the resources of other Playcentres. Powell et al. claimed in rural areas Playcentres may even provide the natural primary physical and social centre of the community. It is a concern that the success of these groups is being undermined by pressures emanating from early childhood policies that have a preference for teacher-led education. Another issue affecting Playcentre is the need for continual compliance with regulation where increasingly fewer parents can make the commitment required (Powell et al., 2005).

In a New Zealand address McMillan (1996) made general reference to a worldwide trend in more recent interventions from education sectors referring exclusively to parent education, or the imparting of information alone, to the idea of giving parents support in their role. The author believed this did not suggest parents are less capable of child rearing than their forbears, but they need more help because of the greater complexities of modern living. Bronfenbrenner (2006) cited other contributing factors such as lack of exposure to naturally occurring parenting models due to smaller families, and isolation from traditional networks. Further to this, parenting represents such a lengthy commitment that must be accomplished simultaneously with a raft of other life tasks. Yet, Ambert (1992) argued parenting is so ordinary that it is taken for granted and not studied. These sentiments are not misplaced as according to Stanley, Prior and Richardson (2005) and Bronfenbrenner (2006) parenting models are of particular concern in a current worldwide society that is experiencing unprecedented levels of

dysfunction. These authors predicted that without relief they augur bleak futures for both children and families.

2.5   Summary

A brief historical overview of early childhood services in New Zealand focused on their diversity as a consequence of ad hoc provision. Development has traced mothers' informal association with these services from earliest times, with an initial emphasis on parent education to a more recent one of support that has recently been formalised into legislation. Early childhood services have been identified as an important aspect of the worldwide parent education movement that had its origins in the early intervention programmes in the 1960s in America. A main effect of these programmes was the success for the whole family when parents were active participants. This was translated into an evolution from targeting parents initially through "top-down" regimes to recognising the effectiveness of support provision within already functioning ecologies. A major aspect of this has been that the participants are also involved in the decision making in these programmes. It has given them more control and therefore a greater ability to take advantage of the intervention opportunities, emphasising the active nature of gaining support. The change of perspective has emphasised the potential importance of early childhood services as programme nuclei that has promoted a raft of community-based initiatives with centres and schools as their focus. These have demonstrated far greater success in countering the limitations of imposed regimes as well as maintaining positive effects of support. The importance of providing education and support for parents in this way cannot be underestimated in the face of increased family dysfunction in societies where traditional networks are depleted.

2.6   The principles of support delivery and coping mechanisms

The next part of the chapter includes a discussion on the effects of support as the main focus of the study. However, before this can be explored, the nature of support needs to be defined. Whilst the term "support" is used in common parlance as a necessary feature of everyday life, as a concept it represents extreme difficulty because it has many definitions. Schumaker and Brownell (1984) argued this lack of clarity not only constitutes a major problem between professionals, but individuals involved in supporting each other do not necessarily agree on what it entails. Perry (1999) described perceptions of support as widely spread as: help, boosted self-confidence, evoking a sense of wellbeing and further education. However, whilst individuals may vary in their beliefs as to the nature of support it is irrefutably established as being the function of a relationship. Schumaker and Brownell defined it as: "an exchange of resources between two individuals perceived by the provider, or recipient to be intended to enhance the wellbeing of the recipient," (p.11). At the same time Bruhn and Philips (1984) cautioned whilst support has an undoubted social focus it cannot be viewed as the only contributing factor in a support transaction that must also be balanced by consideration of environmental and physical factors.

Weissbourd and Kagan (1989) defined support as having particular meaning when related to the family context. They believed it pre-supposes the importance of parents needing reduced stress, a healthy social life and a confident self-image to carry out their parenting in a setting that operates across cultural and social barriers as well as collaboration within community resources. It is a definition with merit because it not only recognises that parents have to be supported in their role, but also that they have personal needs. Smith et al. (2000) believed this was something that was frequently overlooked in supporting mothers because it is often so difficult to isolate the needs of mothers from their children because they are so inextricably interwoven during the early years. The authors made these claims on the basis of a comprehensive review of literature from an ecological perspective in New Zealand, that covered early childhood education for children from birth to five years of age. Cochran et al. (1990) likewise

argued it is very important to recognise mothers' networks have two dimensions, both parenting and personal and both need to be acknowledged. Consequently a relationship of support is best that will increase mothers' competence and self-confidence as well as promote pleasure in and understanding of their children.

The complexity of a support definition is amply matched by the intricacies of its operation. However, whilst problematic according to Clark and Watson (1988) its flexibility is at the same time a major factor of its usefulness because such versatility allows it to meet highly diverse needs. Bolger (1989) identified support as operating by stabilising a positive mood that aids everyday coping and was particularly applicable to mothers because the effects of stress on mood are stronger for women than men. Whilst support comes in many guises, according to Cohen and Wills (1985) in general terms it may be categorised into three major areas: emotional, informational and service-based. The authors believed whilst mothers' multifaceted, incremental role would activate all types of support their needs may fluctuate in different contexts. O'Hara, Rehm and Campbell (1983) illustrated this in their findings that whilst informational support was a high priority for mothers, emotional reassurance played a particularly significant role initially in postpartum adjustment. In an Australian study with similar results by Allan and Schultz (1988) the authors believed whilst emotional instability emanated from mothers' initial sense of inadequacy in their new role, it could actually have a significant purpose. This view was the result of conducting a quantitative study that correlated measures of mothers' psychological growth, self-esteem, ego development, feelings of self-confidence and mastery. A major finding was that the lack of confidence mothers experienced might in fact be carefully timed, effecting an appropriate dependency that enabled them to ask for reassurance and help during this period. However, equally the authors agreed it was undesirable for this state of mind to continue indefinitely, because of the need to graduate to self-reliance.

Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi and Johnson (1990) argued strongly that confidence is a necessary requisite for support because it is a psychological factor considered to be strongly related to social competency. Consequently without

confidence personal networks that form the basis of support cannot be established. The significance of this is that support rather than being a commodity that remains dormant waiting to be activated by stress, is continually part of any social interactions. This highlights the significance of having continually functioning social networks that particularly support the present need of the person accessing support (Bruhn & Philips, 1984). At the same time the nature of support means that rather than just being given by one person to another it requires action and an element of reciprocity, so that not only is support offered, the giver must also feel reinforced for it to continue (Broadhead, 1983). However, Broadhead cautioned the cyclical conditions of gaining support may be a stumbling block for some would-be recipients who through personal characteristics or environmental constraints are unable to give such a commitment to forging social ties.

2.6.1   Life stress and ways of coping

The reason support is so important is because it constitutes the single most effective coping function for mothers in their family role by maintaining a sense of wellbeing that wards off depression (Thoits, 1985). Pfannenstiel and Seltzer (1989) argued whilst sensations of stress are routinely experienced in everyday living, certain life events and stages tend to be recognised as particularly likely to precipitate perceptions of stress, with the birth of a firstborn falling into this range. A lack of support at this time can lead to an excess of stress that can easily precipitate depression which not only impacts negatively on mothers' own lives but also those of her child and family. In a survey conducted in New Zealand by the Auckland University of Technology, extreme stress was found to be a prevalent condition of 41% of the entire population surveyed (303 New Zealanders and 1006 Australians). The hardest hit group was 30-34 year olds, particularly those experiencing the birth of a child, or with growing children, whose stress levels far exceeded non-parents (New Zealand Herald, 2006). Cutrona (1984) likewise estimated that up to 15% of women experience depressive symptoms of at least moderate severity in the weeks following child birth and delivery. Even if this is

avoided there may be a less serious health impact, or at least a general reduction in confidence.

2.6.2 Motherhood as a stressful life-stage

White and Woollett (1993) argued motherhood is a major target for stress because it extends over such a lengthy period of time. Not only do mothers have the main responsibility for child-raising even in modern times, but they are totally unprepared for its impact. Gilbert (1994) argued it is even more devastating because there are few designated contexts to support the transition, beyond a health focus. As well, according to Smith et al. (2000) being a mother is so inextricably bound up with her own identity that it can enfold her to such a degree that it is seen as her only function, so that mothers become an appendage of their child with few if any personal outlets. The authors believed if this is unrelenting it can undermine a mother's right as an individual to be able to enjoy life, and realise her own potential along with the other responsibilities and roles she may be called upon to fulfil. Coverman and Sheley (1986) believed the inevitable pressures involved in adapting to these changes frequently initiate a sense of inadequacy. Mothers are overcome by the sudden realisation that not only is so much unknown about the parenting role, there are also limited opportunities to acquire the knowledge that whilst previously irrelevant, now assumes looming proportions.

Butler et al. (2000) described the transition to parenthood as a time of great upheaval in family lifestyle and functioning gender roles, where mothers whether employed or not continue to carry out most of the domestic load. In a qualitative New Zealand study that took into account the perceptions of eight couples, the authors concluded that men's contribution is still constrained by hours of availability. Whilst attitudes towards parenthood have changed, work structures, education and support services have not altered to the same extent. Butler et al. took this to mean that mothers still have the main responsibility for children therefore parenthood still precipitates greater life changes for women than men. An important aspect of this is the lost spontaneity of action and

inevitable dependency on others. In addition, the continual tension between "being a mother" and "being their own person" results in a balance only being accomplished over time. The authors believed in order to cope with the new lifestyle mothers rapidly gain strategies that promote forward planning to a greater degree, as well as taking advantage of short periods of time and sharing childcare with friends. All of which are compatible with early childhood centre membership.

The competing demands for mothers' time as well as knowledge and experiential limitations are only some of the challenges mothers encounter. Whilst women are adjusting to a new lifestyle, they are also exiting from a previous one that may well have included employment outside the home. According to K. Powell and J.G. Powell (2001) financial loss is one of the most important stresses encountered by families, yet it is often dismissed in discussions about parenting. The researchers believed this to be particularly the experience of middle class women who have a greater need to reconcile their new status as mothers with their previous position, often after having spent years in tertiary study and building a career. In support terms the inhibiting process of decision-making about whether to continue or end a career, delays mothers' social decision making and has significant effects by stalling the development of new personal networks (McKim, 1987). The case studies conducted by Butler et al. (2000) yielded similar reactions by mothers. One commented:

> *It took me a long time to get my confidence up in what I was doing because you are so unsure. It's so different, and the loneliness. I think of suddenly being out there working with people, being dressed up, to suddenly being at home and trying to get into a routine. I found I had lost my identity being at home. You don't feel you are really part of the world and you don't feel you are really contributing to society* (p.29).

Whilst invariably motherhood precipitates replenishment of networks Larner (1997) argued it should not be seen as insurmountable. When viewed as a normal event, rather

than requiring interventions, it has the capacity to be resolved in ordinary, pleasurable ways as within early childhood communities.

2.7   Summary

Support represents major issues in provision because individuals have difficulty agreeing as to its precise nature as a consequence of it being a construct. However it has a significant role to play as the single most important coping system for promoting wellbeing and confidence, so that individuals avoid the depressive effects of stress. It is particularly cogent for mothers at the onset of parenting that is a time of unprecedented and unexpected change. Significant in this period is the all consuming connection between mother and child that masks a mother's own needs, but also requires her to gain support on behalf of both of them. Undisputed is the contingency of support upon relationships that identifies their construction as the major part of any facilitation.

2.8   Relationships as catalysts of support

It has been argued that support, the major panacea for countering the effects of stress, is contingent upon building and maintaining appropriate networks of relationships. The following paragraph sets out their operation and versatility as well as the support benefits they promote and the way these have been capitalised upon in formalised community initiatives. Cochran and Brassard (1979) defined *social networks* as "people outside the household who engage in activities and exchanges of an affective or material nature with the members of the immediate family" (p.601). It is in this way that mothers are networked through the parental role itself, engaging in activities and interactions that influence the performance of their role. Larner (1997) believed relationships exist when two lives become enmeshed by needs and interests and both are intent on pursuing and sustaining interactions. Although Cochran and Brassard found kin relationships to be the most effective at the time of an infant's birth they are not always functional and may be

too distant to be helpful. In this instance peer relationships, as well as the external support of appropriate agencies and informal social groups such as early childhood services are compensatory (Pearlin & Turner, 1987).

Whilst relationships are the basis of all human support systems they represent highly individual processes with people varying widely in their needs and capacity (Folkman, 1984). Some people find large loose groups of acquaintance desirable, others are satisfied by one or two close relationships (Walker & Riley, 2001). Diener, Eunkook, Lucas and Smith (1999) found relationship building to be highly predictable by personality type, whilst Cohen and Wills (1985) suggested some individuals may actually be said to have "coping dispositions" by the way they are able to make much more provision for themselves in varying degrees of self-support, so that they are less reliant on others. At the same time, Cohen and Wills (1986) believed despite the fact that responses are innately determined, they are part of a transactional process that is continually modified by experience, therefore there is always hope of positive modification within a nurturing environment.

The high variability of individual needs has implications for support delivery. However, in the context of early childhood communities it prescribes the development of an environment where self-confidence and self-determination are nurtured in an individual way. Allan and Schultz (1988) described how support arises out of gradual increases in self-esteem that stimulate changes in social behaviour. These events eventually lead to an autonomy that initiates social contact and a sustained willingness to engage in ongoing exchange. Allan and Schultz believed the stimulation to engage in social rituals that result in friendship are further reinforced by the information that one is held in high esteem by others. As a result of acquired self-confidence individuals are able to take action towards eliminating stressful circumstances as well as to adjust psychologically to circumstances that cannot be changed. According to Anchor and Thomason (1977) for some people this may be as simple as knowing that others are available in times of need so that confidence is boosted even if they actually never initiate assistance.

2.8.1 Relationships and different dimensions of support

The complex nature of support also implies flexibility, not only in the diverse capacities that people demonstrate for support, but also because the relationships that they build give them access to different types. Emotional support, found usually in intimate relationships, provides empathy through companionship that also leads to practical benefits. Informational support leads to a repertoire of knowledge about the particular interests of the group that in the early childhood context relates to parenting (Genovese, 1980). Unger and Powell (1980) believed that rather than it being a question of whether social networks provide support, it is under what conditions?

Intimate support that defines a particular quality of emotional empathy that is a feature of peer relationships requires a close match in interests and world view as well as indefinable characteristics of friendship (McGuire & Gottleib, 1979). Whereas this type of relationship has always been accepted as providing inestimable emotional value, it has until more recently been undervalued in terms of its potential social learning capacity. The view has prevailed because of the inference that there are only limited resources when there is the same level of inexperience. However, peer relationships are increasingly being recognised as useful within the support process. Success is attributable to the shared empathy generated through the same set of life stage issues and equal social status that recognises authentic experiences. The McGuire and Gottleib study set out to provide interventions to strengthen the resources of new parents attending early childhood centres by providing them with social support from others experiencing the same transition to parenthood. Their interventions demonstrated a high degree of facilitation success, particularly when marginally more experienced mothers operated in partnership with their less experienced peers. These findings are reminiscent of Vygotsky's (1978) work where effective learning was associated with this type of social connection.

2.8.2 Support through diverse relationships

Whilst close friendships represent the ultimate in enjoyable companionship as a special source of intimate empathetic support and knowledge, Cochran et al. (1990) argued they still only represent one of many potentially valuable social connections available in early childhood centres. Detached support is critical too. Not only does it expose recipients to a much wider range of possibilities than resides within a close one-to-one context, it is responsive to the needs of personal styles where some individuals find it difficult to develop close relationships. At the same time it accommodates the cyclical nature of centres where new mothers may at first require low commitment support. Cochran et al. believed detached support operated through the medium of group relationships that are invaluable because even when an individual is temporarily absent, others learn to fill in with complementary responsibilities. The authors argued such groups have potential as *network reserves* that are not always recognised as they are usually under-used by network members.

Another useful relationship identified by Cochran et al. (1990) as available within centre networks is *peripheral ties*. Whilst these constitute even more distant connections than network reserves their advantage is that they encompass the whole community. Likona (1988) defined the idea of *community* as:

> *Creating a group that extends to others the respect one has for oneself...to come to know one another as individuals to respect and care about one another and to feel a sense of membership in and accountability to the group* (p.421).

The quality inherent in wider community relationships has many advantages. Likona believed this included: Security where you can take risks and ask for help; open communication where members share what is happening; shared goals or objectives and connectedness or trust where members feel they contribute to the benefit of the whole. Cochran et al. (1990) also placed value on peripheral ties because they endure even when not accessed for some time and their potential remains even beyond centre

membership. In addition there is a sense that this type of fragmented but stable social connection may have particular significance for some individuals who have a personal preference for detached relationships. The same elements of community were identified and interpreted by Powell et al. (2005) as "cultural capital" in relation to Playcentre organisations.

The reliance on community for the purpose of gaining maternal support would seem to refute the view that because of the fragmentation of traditional networks a sense of community in the wider sense no longer exists. However, Cochran et al. (1990) argued these ideas are open to challenge and in reality communities are alive and well. Caruso (2000) believed it is even possible to say that the value of community has been re-assessed and translated into an increased responsibility for families and rediscovery of networks in appreciation of the needs they fulfil. This has been illustrated by the paradigmatic shift from individual to community responsibility for raising the next generation that is a growing force both locally and internationally. It is exemplified in particular formalised community programmes that are the subject of the next section of this chapter.

2.9   The development of early childhood community enhancement initiatives

Community initiatives that take advantage of local settings to bring support and cohesion to families that live within their naturally occurring networks are the result of both individual as well as government programmes that exist worldwide as well as in New Zealand. The beliefs inculcated in these community initiatives stem from co-constructionist theory that emphasises the impact of social and cultural factors on all development (Rogoff, 1994). The theory asserts two main principles that knowledge rather than being passively assimilated by the learner is actively built up through the construction of meaning. Vygotsky proposed that because thought, to a large extent, emerges as a social process, it is only internalised by the individual after it has been expressed socially. Therefore, the key aspect of community initiatives for support is the

desire to include parents more productively within a collaborative framework by recognising their unique contribution because of the particular knowledge they have of their child. At the same time the everyday exchange that occurs during these processes is a valuable vehicle for gaining authentic contextual information that is eventually responsible for constructing a valuable repertoire of knowledge.

Rogoff et al. (2001) identified the empowering way that parents learn in these early childhood communities along with both teachers and children as part of the integrated negotiation of information is in stark contrast to traditional approaches. Fosnett (1996) described these more recently recognised processes as reflecting the idea that knowledge is not merely a copy of the external world and the information given to an individual. Instead it is constructed when a learner is motivated to benefit by the material offered it being processed and melded with the established ideas the person already holds. However, Smith et al. (2000) cautioned recognition of the active stance by the learner must not be taken by teachers themselves to abrogate responsibility because they have an important role in providing a suitable environment. Other researchers have argued similarly, with the additional caution, that enterprises rather than just emerging spontaneously are the result of extreme collaborative effort (Bertram & Pascal, 2000; Konzal, 2000; Rogoff, 1994; Whalley, 2002). In the same way that ecological and co-constructionist theories have been responsible for a worldwide trend toward family support programmes, a theory of lifespan development has been developed that rather than just linking education with children presumes that adults continue to learn throughout their lifetime (Galinsky, 1990). This has fitted well with the idea of parent education. At the same time according to McMillan (1996) parent education has gained further impetus consequent to parents being required to assume responsibility for managing schools and early childhood centres. However, McMillan believed whilst new models of integrated parent education are well instated in theory they have not as yet filtered down to the practices in all parent education initiatives in every community. McMillan cautioned this will not occur easily as accomplishing improved coverage represents a very complex undertaking because unlike children, parents are not members

of a compulsory sector of education. Neither is there a parallel to a consumer association that gives them advocacy at a national level.

2.9.1   Support through successful community programme initiatives

Chapter two continues by identifying a selection of successfully established early childhood community enterprises worldwide. Included are brief summaries about: Reggio Emilia in Italy as an individual community enterprise, as well as three government initiatives, two in England: Early Excellence Centres and Sure Start and one, Centres of Innovation in New Zealand. The most renowned is the Reggio Emilia pre-school movement in Italy that represents the true spirit of local networks. It grew spontaneously out of a desire for local regeneration after the devastation and disruption of the second world war. The value of the enterprise lies in the inclusive philosophy of parent involvement that recognises that families have unique values as opposed to institutions that operate uniformly. The inclusion and involvement of the whole family is deliberate in this approach and central to the planning and operation of early childhood centres through negotiated dialogue (Katz, 1995). Katz was impressed by the amount of energy given to the establishment and maintenance of parent-school relationships in these communities referring to their success as "impressive, inspiring, and also daunting" (p.44). Spaggiari (1998) believed the significance of such movements as the Reggio Emilia early childhood centres also lies in their capacity to preserve the communities they support, as without the initiation and successful functioning of local institutions, their unique character can be completely lost. Therefore, community participation of this kind may also be viewed as a means of protecting educational institutions from excessive bureaucracy as well as stimulating co-operation between educators and parents.

A government initiative that set out to establish multiple agencies around the nuclei of early childhood settings is exemplified by the Early Excellence Centres in England that are credited with already having had major benefits for parents as well as their children

(Bertram & Pascal, 2000). In all centres parents were reported to have: enhanced self-esteem, health and a sense of wellbeing over time. As well they have experienced more confidence, less isolation, less stress and improved quality of life. Facilitation included the creation of local social support networks and friendships to help sustain family life, through the sharing of experiences and giving of advice to aid families through crises. Practical actions also featured such as: providing lifts, childcare, collecting children and passing on baby clothes and toys to help families function more effectively on a day-to-day basis. As one of the major issues in current society relates to the diversity of families, it was particularly significant that the programme was judged as being very effective despite the presence of a high number of new immigrants. Likona (1988) argued this was an important consideration, as the frequently poor integration of these groups is a growing issue, because of the absence of the kin relationships that offer the historical and obligatory connections which normally form a major part of primary support. Bertram and Pascal (2000) found clear evidence that success in the EECs was facilitated by the offers of practical help and advice, introductions to other local community members, as well as by being linked with other families facing similar challenges. The success of this and other programmes associated with multi-disciplinary community support within early childhood centres has been responsible for their burgeoning development.

An example of one of these individual centres is the Pen Green neighbourhood initiative operated by Margaret Whalley and a team of practitioners. Whalley (2002) advocated the role of educator as a 'resourceful friend' to both parents and children, being convinced that parents have a critical role to play in their children's learning and development, particularly within today's society. However, along with this Whalley recognised the quixotic nature of parenting that can be incredibly rewarding, yet extremely emotionally and physically draining with the limitations placed by reduced personal freedom. The initiative used a set of case studies of parents from the centre to allow in-depth investigation, as well as references to compare progress. In these Whalley and her team identified with the experiences mothers had of limited feedback from other adults as well as fears that what they were doing was wrong. Whalley

recognised that traditional work with parents worldwide was characterised by a lack of understanding of their needs. Teachers tended to do things for rather than with parents as well as making incorrect assumptions abut their lack of interest when they chose not to participate in disempowering situations. Whalley reported the experiences at Pen Green taught that whilst sharing power was a necessary part of building worthwhile relationships with parents, it was also a particular issue for teachers. Their initial fears that they would be unable to handle the situation if they conceded power to parents had to be continually worked upon. All successes had to be monitored and reinforced with succeeding generations of the community with positive outcomes only attributable to considerable negotiation and goodwill on the part of all participants.

A further United Kingdom initiative has been the Sure Start programme that targets young pregnant mothers and their pre-school families in lower socio-economic areas, with a goal of support for families and communities and prevention of social exclusion. The programme has been endowed with considerable infrastructure and financial support and while a national enterprise there are also local infrastructures. Three main target areas in improving the life of young families include: improving social support and emotional wellbeing; strengthening the families and communities; improving social support and health (Roberts & Hall, 2000). An important aspect of the programme has been that rather than removing already established and successful existing services, providers have looked for gaps in these and ways to improve their effectiveness (Wiggins et al., 2005). Outcomes of the recent National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) national programmes conducted by Wiggins et al. suggest that whilst there is still work to be done in the programmes to support social and emotional wellbeing, there is cause for optimism. There has been an excellent impact made on building, strengthening and re-connecting families and communities that largely reflect the bolstering of naturally occurring family networks. The evaluation is complex. Particularly notable are the contextual differences where aspects of the programme work better in some districts than in others. Always an issue is the extent to which the content should be standardised, because of the call for it to be more prescriptive about the essential elements of individual projects in order to improve facilitation of delivery in the goal to increase its

effectiveness (Roberts & Hall, 2000). However, new pilot initiatives are being developed with the objective of targeting areas that have been found to be less effective with a view to national improvement from what has already been learned through established programme evaluations (Wiggins et al., 2005).

2.9.2   A New Zealand community support initiative

In New Zealand a similar, if less ambitious programme (operating in selected early childhood services) is the Centres of Innovation (COI) project also established by a government initiative, announced in 2002 as part of the 10 year strategic plan for early childhood education policy (Meade, 2005). The initial plan was for six selected centres (with provision for subsequent rounds to eventually accommodate a good cross-section of services nationally over time) to work with researchers to undertake action research related to innovations in teaching and learning as well as share outcomes from this with the community. COI participants are expected to disseminate personally, as well as undertake establishment of online networks and develop forums of debate, both locally and within the wider community as an ongoing process. At the same time there is the intention of gaining benefits for families by linking them with local family health and social services, that according to Albritton et al. (2003) is the best way of ensuring support has long term benefits.

2.10   Summary

As relationships are the basis of support there is an urgency to replenish networks that are no longer useful at life stage change. In the context of motherhood, mothers demonstrate an active role in building new social connections that encompass a repertoire of parenting empathy and information. Early childhood communities are ideal places for this to occur. They consist of individuals with mutual interest in parenting information and similar time and mobility constraints. Early childhood communities

represent naturally occurring networks reflecting a similar worldview and local knowledge. Whilst close relationships represent particular benefits in emotional support there are other valuable types of social connection in these centres. Group relationships are useful for the low commitment and continuity of support they provide when individuals are absent. As well, the whole community contributes to and benefits from peripheral ties that are important for the wide spectrum of information they capture. In the trend towards a greater recognition of their worth for support, as well as education of adults, some early childhood communities worldwide have become formalised into shared co-operatives with parents and programmes of support. The specific initiatives referred to in this chapter pay particular attention to collaborative relationships and a mutual contribution of resources. Apart from the many benefits they accrue with a child focus they exemplify successful implementation of the shift away from a traditional view of parent support as education. Instead parents are empowered to take control of their own learning and support in an integrated way.

2.11   Early childhood teachers' attitudes towards supporting mothers

It has been argued that there has been considerable success achieved by early childhood community initiatives internationally, as well as in New Zealand, in benefits to children and their families. However, their important results in empowering parents have been relatively slow to trickle down to being commonplace in all local early childhood centres. In workshops conducted in New Zealand D. Powell (1996) argued that despite legislation this is true both in America as well as in New Zealand. However, Powell believed it to be expected because of the complexity associated with implementation. His views are shared by a number of international as well as New Zealand authors, who attributed it to teachers and parents having difficulties working collaboratively due to the inherent power differential between them as well as putting theoretical documents into practice (Bertram & Pascal, 2000; Hughes & McNaughton, 1999b; Konzal, 2000; Meade, 2005; Rogoff, 1994; Whalley, 2002). There was general agreement between the same authors that implementation was possible but only through the support of outside

expertise as well as considerable infrastructures. The final part of the literature review considers this with particular reference to the reconciliation required between the perspectives of teachers and mothers in order to construct early childhood communities that operate upon socially co-operative principles.

Whilst teachers are enthusiastic about building partnerships with parents they have difficulty translating it into action. Churchill (2003) argued this is consequential to teachers' attitudes towards what their role is in supporting parents. Churchill conducted an American study that focused on the implications of "goodness of fit" between teachers' and mothers' relationships within a Headstart population of 45 families. The quantitative study employed a battery of standardised testing. Churchill identified two major issues that were inhibiting to teacher-mother relationships. The first was teachers' beliefs about the difference between their trained professional and parents' lay knowledge that made them reluctant to share power with parents. According to Galinsky (1990) who expresses an American perspective, tension between parents and teachers is commonplace, with negative perceptions of parents by staff. Secondly teachers are untrained to facilitate adults and adhere to traditional views of support. Rather than understanding parent education as an active process they see it as an educational commodity that teachers dispense to parents as passive recipients. As a consequence teachers fail to make connections between collaborative relationships and the generation of support (Churchill, 2003; Hughes & McNaughton, 1999b; D. Powell, 1997a; Whalley, 2002).

D. Powell (1989) argued teachers' attitudes are shaped by the strong beliefs they hold about the meaning of their qualification that drives an uneasy acceptance of parents' lay information. D. Powell believed this has been promoted by a model of professionalism that implies trained personnel carry on work without interference from lay people that has been assimilated into early childhood philosophies. Consequently, teachers have become accustomed to always assuming the prerogative of defining the situation and determining the course of action rather than sharing it with parents. From this viewpoint according to Genovese (1980) and Stevens (1988) it has been a plausible step for

teachers to consider their role with parents as disseminators of information that has led to a definition of support as parent education. There is considerable agreement in both international and local literature for this view as well as for parent education being prevalently enshrined in a traditional delivery (Bowman, 1997; Galinsky, 1990; Grey & Horgan, 2003; Konzal, 2000; Lubeck, deVries, Nicholson & Post, 2000; D. Powell, 1989; Rogoff et al., 2001).

2.11.1 Support as isolated packages of parent education

Churchill (2003) argued that traditional delivery of parent education usually takes the form of isolated packages of educational information remote from the daily programme that fail to meet parents' informational needs for a much wider spectrum of knowledge. However, more importantly as deliveries are "top-down" they do not adhere to the principles of successful learning that are contextual, timely and include the learner's personal construction within the complexity of local discourse (Churchill, 2003; Kagitcibasi & Bekman, 1991; Lubeck et al., 2000). Lubeck et al. believed that as a consequence, rather than being supported, parents felt demeaned and disempowered. King and Everts (1983) in a New Zealand study that yielded similar results found this meant parents were reluctant to attend further sessions.

Churchill (2003) believed a major reason teachers employed educational packages as the best way to support parents was because they had difficulty with the diffuse concept of support and were confident with educational material. However, Burge (1999) argued the main difficulty teachers experience in having to interpret their role with parents is a lack of training. Draper and Duffy (2006) likewise advocated the importance of teachers being trained to have a good understanding of parents' needs from their own perspective. The authors based their views on experiences in the Thomas Coram Centre in London where they highlighted the complexity of facilitating parents. Whilst it entails working around children's learning, it is not this alone. As well there is a need for a considerable focus on parents' personal support, training and involvement in

management. Draper and Duffy focused on an integration of parent support and exchange of information around vital times in the centre programme. As a consequence specialist staff were freed up for this purpose at "settling in" and at arrival and collection times. Whilst a feature of this support was that it occurred informally, it was still intentionally organised, showing an understanding of parents' needs that was reminiscent of Dalli's (1997) commitment to dual support, were mothers and children are supported together rather than the formers' needs being viewed separately.

Presently teachers' ability to support parents rather than being as a result of training is based upon two premises. The first is that teachers are adults themselves. Whilst this does not take into account whether they have had any parenting experiences of their own, it also does not reflect the professional emphasis on practice being underpinned by training. Cullen (1996) raised a number of concerns about implementation of the curriculum due to the fragmentation and incomplete training of many practitioners that has not equipped them well to apply much of the underpinning theory. Hatton and Smith (1995) believed interpretation of theory to practice is in any case difficult, associated with perceptions of the teaching profession being formative and therefore continually remote from academic rhetoric. The second premise is that teachers can impart support and education to parents on the basis of their competence with children. However, according to Konzal (2000) research yields little evidence that the learning principles teachers espouse with children are transferable to adults. Teachers like most grownups generally adhere to the traditional view that adults learn through formal practices. These philosophies further emphasise teachers' role with parents as a separate programme workload.

2.12   Mothers' perceptions of support

Inherent in the idea of collaborative early childhood services is the idea of relationships between teachers and mothers that thrive on communication. Churchill (2003) believed, "The more communication between teachers and parents the more they can work

actively to enhance...their own relationship" (p.117). However, there is much evidence both in New Zealand, as well as internationally, this is not the prevailing experience because of the power differential that usually exists in these relationships (Churchill, 2003; Coddington, 2006; Hughes & McNaughton, 1999b; Martin, 2006). In an Australian study by Hughes and McNaughton it was argued that early childhood staff are anxious about their relationships with parents. The authors employed a multiple methods design with questionnaires, focus groups and telephone surveys within the framework of four case studies. In a population of staff where most had formal early childhood training "participants were consistently ambivalent about involving parents in their programmes because developing a shared understanding with them, about what was in the best interests of their child, was neither easy nor guaranteed" (p.1).

A more recent study in Ireland by Martin (2006) suggests that the concept of partnerships with parents is something that is no closer to being resolved. As in New Zealand, Irish government policy emphasises the benefits of these relationships, yet Martin's study found parents had few opportunities for self determination. Success was hampered by both staff and parent perceptions being that: fulltime working parents have no time, limited opportunities for joint decision making, a lack of partnership information for parents and poor presence on management committees. These examples suggest that whilst there are warm feelings and much goodwill between teachers and mothers there is a lack of common understandings because according to Wenger (1999) this is only possible when there is regular discussion and shared decision making within the group. This is true of the concept of support, where teachers' beliefs about it being encapsulated in educational packages do not match mothers' much wider definition. At the same time teachers do not take into account the need for mothers to make an active response. Whilst this is not unexpected given teachers' understanding of support it has significance for its delivery (Perry, 1999; D. Powell, 1997a; Schumaker & Brownell, 1984).

2.12.1 Support as a process of social exchange

There are two main differences indicated in the literature between teachers' and mothers' perceptions of support. Mothers show a preference for gaining support through their everyday interactions with the early childhood community rather than from teachers' separate provision. Apart from this they have a much wider spectrum of needs than is generally recognised as relevant in centres by teachers. Whilst mothers' beliefs about support are documented in the literature as qualitatively different from those of teachers there is also a sense that mothers are not always aware of the process having occurred (Renwick, 1989). One reason for this is identified by Dalli (1997) as being the close relationship between themselves and their child that tends to mask everything else. Smith et al. (2000) believed the bond between mother and child was so all consuming that mothers find it difficult to recognise their own needs as separate and focus on themselves. The authors believed even when mothers do reflect on their own needs it is probable they dismiss them in the face of the more pressing business of parenting their child. As a consequence, informal exchange is featured in the literature as providing the most potent spontaneous help (Duncan et al., 2004; Schumaker & Brownell, 1984). According to Schumaker and Brownell in any case support transactions can actually be so effective that they occur as an automatic response, so they are probably not evaluated by either participant. Additional evidence suggests that mothers' lives are often so busy that their concentration on just getting through the day may not activate impressions of support until they have the leisure to reflect on the event much later (Duncan et al., 2004). Johnston (1999) a Playcentre mother reported on this retrospective view:

> *If you had asked me (then, when I started Playcentre) I would have said I was only attending for my children. On reflection I see I was struggling in my mother role when I started Playcentre. I had gone from a high powered (high paid) job to becoming a mum (no pay) which seemed to be a role to be ashamed of when quoting my career to working friends. Playcentre has given me my confidence back* (p.21).

In addition the effects of support may not be appreciated until support has been withdrawn. Such an explanation is compatible with Cochran et al.'s (1990) study where the authors reported natural responses alert individuals to the absence rather than the presence of support as a mechanism to motivate them to replenish the void left when their personal networks are no longer functioning optimally. Dawson (1998) a Playcentre mother illustrated this by describing how unsupported she felt after leaving the centre:

Meggie was very happy making the transition to school. I was desperately trying to find a way to stay involved in Playcentre. I had made many wonderful friends. I would never have imagined four years previously that I could grow in so many ways. (p.7).

2.12.2 Support as an active response

Whatever mothers' impressions of how they gain support from their early childhood service it is always demonstrated as the outcome of active processes. This is first apparent in centre selection that according to Friedrich (1997) requires immense fortitude at a vulnerable time. According to Kerslake Hendricks, Bowden and Chamberlain (2004) the first weeks represent a crucial period because this is when mothers make choices and decisions about whether to make a regular long-term commitment to the centre. Bartlett (2001) argued even when mothers are engaged with a centre there are still many accommodations they have to make before they become established members of the group. Not the least of these is trying to make sense of what seems initially to be chaos because all such communities have an "internal structure" which is invisible to the uninitiated, consisting of the philosophy and practices that help participants determine expectations about themselves and others. It is only when the strangeness wears off and mothers become attuned that they have the confidence to build relationships and contribute to the community. The experience was described by Bartlett:

In the beginning I was an observer...I think parents grow in this programme just as much as kids do...I have grown in leaps and bounds from the time I walked in up until now (p.55).

It was characteristic of mothers' support experiences that they occurred most readily in early childhood communities where they were given the greatest opportunities for involvement in decision making. In the New Zealand literature this was most often associated with Playcentres whose unique structures promoted empowerment through relationships, leadership and training (Bartlett, 2001; Hooker, 2000; Johnston, 1999; McMillan, 1996; Powell et al., 2005). Whilst the Playcentre Federation in New Zealand is recognised for its effective model of support (McMillan, 1996; Powell et al., 2005) as well as having systems that make it more visible to mothers, it would be incorrect to establish it as the only model operating in early childhood education. Dalli (1997) illustrated this by reflecting on her own experiences of being a parent in a childcare centre: "I am acutely aware that our early childhood centre functions as a tremendous source of parent support in our family" (p. 21).

2.13   Summary

Collaborative relationships are associated with effective communication that promotes shared ideas and definitions. However, this is not commonplace in early childhood either in New Zealand or internationally, with the result that teachers and mothers have widely differing views of support and its contingencies. Chief amongst them is the lack of recognition that mothers need to be able to participate actively in decision making as this is a requirement of support generation. The reason for the slow transition to this becoming a reality has been attributed to the difficulties associated with the complex processes involved in establishing collaborative partnerships. They range from modification of established teacher attitudes regarding their role with parents to teachers being untrained to facilitate adults. As these are leadership issues it appears unlikely that

they will be resolved outside of support being external to the centre, suggesting targeted rather than incidental intervention would be most appropriate.

2.14   Conclusion

A review of the literature has suggested that conditions in New Zealand early childhood centres closely follow theoretical and societal trends that have emanated from overseas with regard to the parent education movement. One aspect of this that has been firmly established is that parent involvement is a necessary part of child achievement, as well as being beneficial for parents themselves. At the same time intervention initiatives have shown parent participation is more effective as well as more enduring when programmes are conducted as part of the naturally occurring networks of families. Whilst this view has sparked the establishment of a range of programmes around the nuclei of early childhood centres, exemplified in New Zealand by the Centres of Innovation, it has also strongly affected the philosophies of local early childhood services. Centres have experienced a shift from mothers having casual involvement to it being part of legislated requirements. These trends are explained in recognition that theory is crucial in understanding research and rarely is one theory able to account for all aspects of human development. The study was not strongly theory driven, being highly influenced by a grounded theory approach, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) that holds that theory generated by qualitative research first emerges from and is then organised around a growing explanation of the findings. The development of the present research design that resonates with the concept of grounded theory within an ecological framework is explained in more detail in chapter three. As a consequence, the present study has drawn upon several different theories to encapsulate the concepts involved.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective was a major underpinning in understanding the relationship between individual mothers and the environmental systems of families and communities in which they operated. It was particularly relevant to the development of propositions that emerged from the data that showed how the

early childhood systems in the study intersected with their individual communities. Resonating with the study also was the view that the ecology of individuals is never static whereby development involves their interaction with an ever changing matrix of ecological systems. In the study this applied to the way in which mothers' support needs were perceived to be incremental, in order to withstand the demands of their continually developing child. In this regard the lifespan theory, particularly with regard to the biological maturational aspect is relevant in women's adjustment to motherhood. Likewise, mothers' experiences as learners, illustrate a socio-cultural perspective that is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory of psychological processes, where the impact of social and cultural factors is emphasised as being an important consideration for all development. Vygotsky's theory asserts two main principles. These are that knowledge, rather than being passively assimilated by the learner is actively built up through the construction of meaning. Vygotsky developed the concept of the "zone of proximal development" as representing the interaction between learning and development where social construction occurs between a novice and a more expert person so that the learner is able to achieve beyond what they can do alone through prompts and leading questions. As the learner becomes more competent they are able to cope with more components of the activity without help. According to Rogoff (1994) it is likely that these cognitive processes, whilst taken for granted as part of the normal repertoire of skills, have become so as a result of individuals having been acquainted with them through their use in everyday activities. These ideas were supported in the study by the way mothers gained particular benefits from their long-term association with early childhood centres particularly when they had opportunities for self-determination. However, a high degree of social co-operation was shown to be necessary to make this a reality and research suggested the difficulties involved in implementing such systems has meant initial trickledown effects have been slow. Whilst there is much goodwill, low levels of real collaboration between teachers and mothers have consequences for the shared concepts necessary for effective maternal support.

The literature, whilst highlighting issues associated with operating socially co-operative early childhood services, frequently reflects overseas experiences that do not compare

well with New Zealand conditions. It is to be hoped that a more useful perspective can be gained as more research becomes available locally as a result of recent initiatives in establishing partnerships between centres and families. A beginning has already been made in early reporting of successes with the COI initiatives (Meade, 2005; 2006). At the same time this draws attention to the fact that mothers, although universally acknowledged as the main caregivers of children (despite increasing societal trends towards role reversal) are rarely accorded an individual focus. Mothers' requirements as main caregivers are invariably immersed in the anonymity of the amorphous: "families" or "parents," to the degree that mothers are only viewed through the lens of their child. This is neither satisfactory from a perspective of identifying mothers' specific parenting needs, nor does it begin to address those of a more personal nature. Paradoxically, this low level focus on their mothers, does not address children's issues either, because of the high integration of their needs with those of their mothers. Although the literature recognises the important links between the enhancement of mothers' parenting skills and increased benefits for their child, almost unrecognised is the contribution to this of mothers' personal wellbeing, confidence and self-efficacy. These represent attributes frequently undermined at this life-stage with few formal opportunities for them to be upheld, early childhood centres representing one of the most favourable contexts.

One of the issues in the support literature concerns definitions, where as a construct even experts disagree as to the nature of support. This was frequently evident in the array of meanings that were ascribed to support. As perspectives are important in this case, noticeably most explored were those of teachers and educators with mothers' very different viewpoint seldom being acknowledged, something that had considerable implications for support provision. Apart from diverse definitions and topics explored in the literature, selection of participants was another factor in identifying credibility of results. As has already been argued teachers and educators have been more frequently surveyed than parents, so that the perspective of parents was not often available. Also, whilst the diversity of early childhood services was captured in terms of retrospective studies these invariably focused on parents' opinions of centre quality, benefits for their child or parenting programmes, rather than parents' contribution, role, or beliefs.

Likewise, because not all service types were represented in the literature it raises the question as to how different mothers' experiences may be in the many different types of services. Methods used in studies invariably encompassed large populations through retrospective surveys or very small samples through interviewing that are not generalisable. There is little observation recorded of settings that documents interactive relationships between participants that establishes concepts beyond opinions. As some aspects of study, such as the implementation of partnerships are relatively recent it is to be hoped that an accumulation of more focused findings from individual studies will be useful in building a more comprehensive picture of these relationships and the support they evoke for mothers. As a result of the perspectives formed through reviewing the literature and reflection upon the aims of the study the following research questions were formulated:

1   To what degree do mothers believe they need and gain personal support as a
     result of being members of an early childhood centre?

2   What according to first time mothers is the nature of effective support?

3   Can it be inferred that any support received by mothers from centres is
     responsive to their changing needs over time?

4   To what extent do centre staff believe they have a role in supporting mothers
     who attend early childhood centres?

5   What are staff perceptions of the nature of effective support for mothers?

6   To what extent can the early childhood centres be viewed as learning
     communities where the contribution of all participants is recognised and valued
     in terms of learning and social support?

Chapter three documents the processes used to develop a suitable qualitative research methodology to answer these questions.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

3.1   Introduction: The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to identify ways in which mothers gain support from early childhood centres. Accordingly four centres were selected from sessional services as it was expected they would offer the greatest opportunities for support because they represented service structures where mothers have the most presence. In order to gain the required information the perspectives of both mothers and staff were sought through a series of individual interviews. Chapter three traces the development of the study design within an appropriate methodology.

3.2   Selection of an appropriate methodology

At the outset of any investigative process whilst outcomes are unknown, there is a combined motivation to subject the interest area to closer scrutiny as well as enough information to suggest a suitable course of action. The logical outcome of this is the development of a research design within a methodology that best accommodates the particular purpose and parameters of the study in terms of gaining the expected outcomes (Sarantakos, 1993). Sarantakos defined methodology as embodying theoretical principles, as well as being a framework that provides guidelines about how research is done and appropriate methods of data collection in the context of a particular paradigm. Designing such a process in order to evaluate a chosen phenomenon is in effect an assessment task where any approach to credibility requires a defined purpose and a complementary evaluation process that ensures a high degree of validity in the results (Neuman, 2003). However, Tolich and Davidson (1990) cautioned that as the

ultimate aim of research is to understand and explain some aspect of society, the methodology must be kept in perspective. Its purpose is to direct the design to its best advantage, combining the strength and rigor of the chosen methods to determine the highest possible degree of validity in project outcome. It is necessary to move beyond methods which merely set down procedures and techniques to a methodology that describes and analyses these methods, throwing light on their strengths, as well as their limitations (Cohen & Manion, 1989).

There are two major methodological options when designing a study: quantitative and qualitative that stem from divergent philosophical perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). The quantitative view comprises a positivist scientific paradigm that asserts the existence of a single reality that is independent of any observer's interest in it, and which operates according to immutable natural laws, many of which take cause and effect form. Chalmers (1982) believed as a result this has promoted a common sense perspective that "scientific knowledge is proven knowledge" (p.1). However, whilst this approach has traditionally been accepted as equating with proving ultimate truths, as well as accepting the mantle of rigor and excellence in terms of controlled variables that are associated with statistical "proof" in quantitative measurement, Chalmers argues it probably goes beyond the validity levels attributed to it. Garrison (1986) likewise expressed reservations about positivist claims that this methodology has an inherent infallibility. The author believed social phenomena cannot be studied in isolation and all sciences are "to some degree interpretive and hermeneutical, all observation participant observation" (p.16). Likewise Huberman and Miles (2002) believed it is not necessary to follow the quantitative paradigm of converting words into numbers and manipulating statistics in order to indulge in serious explanation. They argued there are much "better, more powerful methods of data analysis...that illuminate the web of local causality" (p.395). These views illustrate the paradigmatic shift that has occurred from credible research being entirely the prerogative of quantitative measures to an increased use of a qualitative methodology particularly when applied to social contexts. The qualitative approach has been labelled variously: "post-positivistic", "subjective", "humanistic",

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"ethnographic" and "naturalistic" that amounts to a recognition that values do intrude, despite all precautions when humans are involved both as investigators and participants in research (Robson, 1993). Acceptance of objective fallibility rather than attempting to counter it has led to increased acceptance of qualitative research for the greater flexibility it offers in understanding social phenomena.

Robson (1993) defined qualitative methodology as encompassing any research that is not quantitative. In contrast to the quantitative positivist view it embraces a constructivist or relativist approach that assumes it is the interactions and beliefs of people that create reality. Consequently there is no single, but many different realities all created by human beings. Thus nature is viewed not as it really is, but only as constructed through human judgement. If people believe certain propositions are real they are real in consequence, and need to be interpreted as such (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). Despite the recent momentum gained by qualitative methodology, it is not in itself a new paradigm. According to Sarantakos (1993) it owes its ancestry to ethnography that is the study of "ethos", nations, people and cultures, deriving structures from anthropology. Qualitative methodology is distinguished not only by trying to understand patterns and norms of behaviour, but also by viewing them within a context rather than in isolation. The major contrast these constructivist principles represent to positivist views is that whilst adherents do not deny the existence of an external world that is independent of the observer, they nevertheless claim that the observer cannot really know this world. Instead making meaning of it occurs through the construction of a representation that depends not only on the researcher's sensory input, but also prior experiences and knowledge. However, the recognition that everyone has unique experiences, so their construction of the world will be different, does not deny that there are many opportunities for sharing common ground because of the similarities people have within their backgrounds (Begg, 1999). This understanding is significant because it represents a paradigmatic shift towards recognising that all methods of inquiry must be considered as suspect through subjective fallibility, which puts non-positivist strategies on a better platform as research methods. These principles may be said to be particularly

relevant for the present study, prompting the selection of a qualitative methodology that best accepts subjective fallibility. This was because the study was based on human inquiry, representing investigator interpretation of the perspectives of staff and mothers in four specific early childhood centres.

3.2.1 Selection of a qualitative methodology

As the purpose of the present study was to explore mothers' experiences of support within the selected contexts of four early childhood communities, the opportunities presented by a qualitative methodology for researching social contexts made it an appropriate choice. At the same time it was being conducted in an educational setting where a qualitative approach is frequently advocated because of the predilection for such studies to set out to describe and to interpret "what is" (Cohen & Manion, 1989). Sarantakos (1993) argued study purpose is pivotal, as trustworthy research design is not just a matter of persuasion towards a particular methodological philosophy. As there is no right way of doing research, quantitative and qualitative methods are simply tools of the social scientist's trade and are used according to circumstances. A qualitative methodology had further merit for the present study because it aimed at gaining information that would promote theories about social support for mothers by early childhood centres. Such a process is *inductive*, where theories are generated through data synthesis rather than being part of a *deductive* process. The latter is typical of quantitative design, where theory is initially hypothesised and the predictions later tested through statistical analysis. According to Davidson and Tolich (2003) the design decision of a study may crudely be described as making this particular choice between inductive and deductive logic. However, Davidson and Tolich cautioned that the level of complexity met in reality seldom allows complete distinction. In some cases a good understanding of a particular phenomenon can only be obtained through a combination of the unique properties of each methodology. With regard to the present study, whilst conducted within an ecological framework it was not strongly theory driven, being

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influenced by the principles of grounded theory as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). These authors developed a particular qualitative approach that rather than starting out to explain a theory, defines a set of systematic procedures that are designed to work towards a theory that is inductively derived. The flexibility of grounded theory allows data and theory to interact. Like positivist research it embraces the same goal of attention to rigor (Neuman, 2003). However, it is different in being inductive. This means grounded theory seeks to build theory from a topic and a few vague concepts, whereas quantitative research that is deductive, begins with an already well developed theoretical base, that is then tested against data (Neuman, 2003). In the present study the original six research questions produced a multiplicity of data that rather than culminating in a single theory, was better expressed as a series of six theoretical statements or propositions (Neuman, 2003), the process of which is described later in this chapter.

Apart from recognition of the inherently different processes that apply to qualitative and quantitative theory building it needs to be accepted that qualitative theory can only explain specific contexts. Qualitative studies are usually not designed to make claims that extend to other persons, times or settings (Yin, 1994). Instead there are assumptions that theoretical outcomes may help make sense of similar situations rather than drawing conclusions about a particular population through statistical inference (Yin, 1994). Whilst this property of non-generalisability may initially appear a deficit, upon closer scrutiny it can be seen as a sublime response to the impossibilities of conducting any in-depth study of social phenomena with large populations. At the same time it is compatible with the idea that the uniqueness of social settings makes comparisons across extensive populations unrealistic (Neuman, 2003). Neuman argued what is important instead, is that although results may not be generalisable to other locations, they present accurate in-depth representations of the opinions or actions of people in the study. In the context of the present study the information sought was of the kind that is not captured through statistical analysis, but is rather the result of in-depth social exchange that according to Geertz (1973) constitutes "thick description" that is a rich

detailed expression of specifics. Its value lies in its being able to capture a sense of what occurs permitting multiple interpretations and in contrast to quantitative summary, standardisation and generalisation. Compatible with the inductive nature of qualitative research Mason (1996) preferred the term "generate" over "collect" when referring to data outcomes because rather than being an already formed body of knowledge it only becomes an entity when it is actively constructed by the researcher.

3.2.2   A qualitative methodology and safeguards to validity

Although there is an increasing enthusiasm for the new horizons represented by qualitative research, the very flexibilities that define its usefulness also give concern as to the credence that can be placed upon its results. However, an intense belief in its inherent ability to meet particular design purposes has led adherents to concern themselves with putting measures into place that increase the *validity* (truthfulness) and *reliability* (consistency) of the findings. As the whole purpose of research is to gain insight, it is crucial that the outcomes are credible and therefore useful for the purpose in mind. Whilst validity and reliability are critical features of research design this is always with an understanding that it involves a margin of error. Rather than there being absolutes it is a question of taking precautions that will reduce this as much as possible (Gronlund & Linn, 1990). In the present qualitative study validity has more relevance than reliability, because it is not seeking the replication that is usually associated with reliability (Silverman, 1993). Instead the field research is confined to a unique setting at a particular time in its existence, that is not only virtually impossible to replicate, but in any case would serve no valuable purpose. Validity on the other hand is concerned with truthfulness in the findings that pre-supposes having a good match between expectations and the actual reality of a construct. In this regard validity is a required element of both qualitative as well as quantitative research, except that it will be approached differently (Neuman, 2003).

Validity is described by Messick (1989) as "an integrated evaluative judgement, of the degree to which empirical evidence, and theoretical rationales, support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences and actions based on test scores or other modes of assessment" (p. 406). Yin (1994) believed validity has more than one aspect. The first, external validity is evident to a higher or lesser degree in this present study design according to whether or not the evidence may be generalised to other populations. This is of less importance in qualitative research and was not relevant in the present study where the focus was on gaining in-depth information that could only be attributed to unique entities. However, validity also has internal value that relates to the integrity of any study for its own merit and as such is applicable to the present project (Neuman, 2003). According to Robson (1993) the main safeguard for promoting increased validity is attitudinal, exemplified by a continuous honest commitment on the part of the researcher, coinciding with that of the participants. It has such indicators as: attention to detail, perseverance and integrity. Whilst quantitative methodologies attempt to do this by the control of variables, qualitative researchers try to achieve it through their orientation, sensitivity towards, and the study of the empirical world. An important baseline is initial construction of appropriate methods of data collection and analysis as well as specific measures of control. These may, for example, be communicative: where degree of validity comes through further questioning of the respondents with the researcher re-entering the field and collecting additional data, or cumulative; where the study is validated by comparing findings with other studies. In this study the researcher demonstrated the first course by re-entering the field to conduct focus group interviews to gain interpretation verification. The results of this are discussed in more detail at the end of chapter three. Such measures ensure data has authenticity rather than being based on unfounded speculation supported by tenuous inferences (Robson, 1993).

An increased occupation with improving measures of validity has come some way towards the increasing acceptance of qualitative methodology. Huberman and Miles (2002) cautioned this must occur if policies, programmes or predictions based upon it are to be perceived as credible. As the origins of qualitative methodology as a rigorous

approach are more recent than quantitative research it was inevitable that the first measures taken relied upon derivatives of quantitative research. Not only was this the recognised scientific model, but its tenets were built upon attaining objectivity, however elusive. Whilst a legacy of this still remains, more recently there have been reflective attempts to develop approaches that are more closely related to qualitative research as a unique methodology (Maxwell, 2002). However, this is still an experimental repertoire. According to Mason (1997) very little consensus has been reached with regard to a recognised structure for a qualitative methodology that fully achieves the aims for credibility. This is because whatever it might be qualitative research does not represent a unified set of techniques or philosophies because it is the legacy of a wide range of intellectual and disciplinary traditions since its anthropological beginnings. Mason advocated measures to increase credibility should be systematic, strategically conducted, yet flexible and contextual, with critical self-scrutiny, or active "reflexivity" (p. 5). Along with intentional safeguards to validity another aspect of design that must be considered is the inevitable personal influences that are found to be deeply integrated into the choices made by individual researchers (Mason, 1996). These arise out of ontological questions that position people with regard to their perspective or reality of the social order. Epistemology is a person's theory of knowledge and therefore concerns the principles and rules that govern how social phenomena can be known, rather than the process being just reduced to data collection issues.

In order to demonstrate credibility of the results in the present study there were several measures taken to increase validity. Firstly a qualitative design was developed that best fitted the in-depth purpose of the study and ethical approval was gained. A *multiple method* approach was employed, whereby the data collected were viewed from different perspectives: recall in interviews, spontaneity in diary entries and observation in field note documentation. Neuman (2003) recommended multiple methods as a way of reviewing the same data from different standpoints. Further credibility was sought through *host verification* of the transcripts where participants were able to comment on their interviews and mothers were interviewed twice. Not only did this elucidate the

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purpose of exploring temporal change for mothers, but through *repetitive measures across time* also gained validity for the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Further measures to gain credibility for the design were: researcher checking of taped data as well as transcriptions and having an organised method of coding the data as it became available, as advocated by Strauss (1987). In order to gain further validity for the project the researcher returned to the field and conducted two focus groups that not only represented an additional method but also constituted an *interpretation verification* where the author gained support for the way the findings were analysed.

3.2.3   Selection of a case study approach

As a qualitative methodology encompasses a raft of different design approaches, the one most suited to the present context was perceived to be the case study, a strategy that focuses on understanding the dynamics evident within single settings (Eisenhardt, 2002). Taylor and Cooren (1996) defined it as a "discursive phenomenon constructed and understood through talk," (p.409). According to Robson (1993) case study methodology "in the real world" provides a rigorous approach to all aspects of an inquiry where you can "tell it as it is, rather than disguise it in the formalised straight jacket of the experimental report" (p.63). Yin (1994) identified case studies as either single or multiple in nature. The present study was an example of the latter where the focus was four early childhood settings. Advantages of the case study approach include: particular usefulness for generating theories from contextual study evidence, through the investigation of processes and layers of information. The holistic nature of case study research is credited with preserving these, rather than only being focused on the end product. Cohen and Manion (1989) described how they are able to encapsulate understandings when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used that are too complex for a survey or experimental strategies to capture.

In the interests of gaining acceptance for case study research as a qualitative methodology Yin (1994) argued it is a serious research strategy, where the case is studied in its own right rather than retaining the anonymity of a sample from a population. Yin believed much of the critique levelled at case study design as a technique has been due to its undefined nature, where the responsibility for validity of the approach must rest with the rigor of the researcher. It must be taken seriously rather than viewing the investigation as just an opportunity to substantiate a pre-conceived position, so that important features are missed, or evidence is misinterpreted. Robson (1993) supported this, again emphasising the importance of a coherent framework where there is attention to design, data collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting. Denscombe (1998) believed this made all the difference between critical, analytical outcomes in research as opposed to producing scattered pictures.

3.2.4   The qualitative researcher as an acknowledged presence in the study setting

Every research design pre-supposes one or more researchers and a primary principle of qualitative methodology accepts they inevitably play a social role within the study. In the current context the researcher's background as a former early childhood educator was acknowledged as an influence during the study as well as in the interpretation of the results. This contrasts with quantitative design where the researcher denies personal involvement by seeking objectivity through distancing themselves from their subjects (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). Neuman (2003) argued acknowledgment of the subjective interpretation of the social context is the essence of social research that does not in any way detract from the high quality of the data. As the data represent processes captured according to individual researcher experiences authenticity is gained through recognition and understanding of their viewpoint, rather than in trying to eliminate their influence. In taking this view Neuman argued whilst the influence remains unspecified it will fluctuate according to the degree of researcher involvement from "complete observer" to "researcher participant".

In the current study a midway approach of "observer as participant" was employed because the nature of the field work entailed controlled visits rather than continual presence in settings. At the same time the researcher's personal biography that included involvement in early childhood centres was acknowledged as influencing the interpretation of data. Sarantakos (1993) argued rather than this detracting from the value of study it allows the research audience improved insight into the author's contribution. However, acceptance of the researcher as a social player in the study field has other implications. It infers a relationship that according to Sarantakos is an agreement between researchers and their colleagues, where all are acknowledged as participants and afforded equal status. It represents a contrast with the quantitative approach where participants are subjects, suggesting they have a lower status than the investigator. At the same time it draws attention to the different terminologies that have developed as a result of divergent methodological viewpoints.

3.3   Selection of a multiple methods approach

The decision to select both mothers and staff as participants, in order to gain different perspectives on the information sought was compatible with the intention to have a rigorous design. Neuman (2003) argued an approach to increased validity is through the use of triangulation, or the use of multiple sources of information, methods, theories and techniques. As outcomes demonstrate a wider view and enhanced interpretability they increase the validity of the results in research design. Consequently Packer and Addison (1989) believed better judgements can be made because any inconsistencies that occur during the process, rather than indicating failure of the assessment, become part of an empirical puzzle that has a solution that invites the researcher to seek a more comprehensive interpretation or look for further evidence. Eisenhardt (2002) considered such an approach to data generation was particularly appropriate for the case study approach selected for this study, because of the opportunities it promotes for building theories. Cohen and Manion (1989) believed multiple method approaches have the

additional advantage of not just looking repetitiously at the same material, but viewing it from different standpoints, taking into consideration that individuals construct their own meanings about the world. Gaining information from diverse perspectives was accounted for in the present study through the use of a multiple method approach that employed: interviews, diaries and environmental field notes. As well as this the researcher returned to the field to conduct two focus groups for the purpose of gaining diverse perspectives on social support within the four selected early childhood centres. The processes of the research from the original design through ethical approval and data collection to coding and analysis are summarised in Figure 1. They comprise the development of the initial design and gaining ethical approval, through informed consent and data collection. Coding and analysis of data culminated in the development of six theoretical propositions and verification of the author's interpretation of the data.

Figure 1: Flow chart: The process of conducting the research
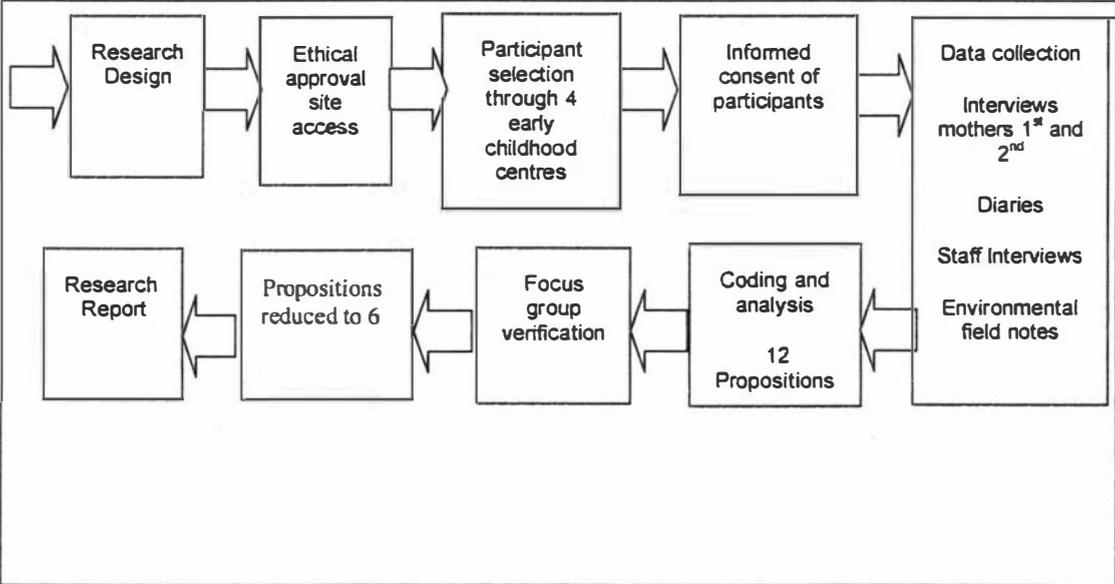
3.4   Ethical considerations in research design

A significant aspect of all research is consideration of ethical issues and the integrity that this implies is a major defining factor of increased validity. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) defined ethics as the principles of right and wrong that are agreed upon by a particular group. In research terms they refer to the specific codes of practice held by most professional and academic disciplines in order to sensitise members to ethical issues that must be circumvented. In studies such as this one, the first priority is the protection of participants from harm through their informed consent. Such guidelines ensure they enter projects voluntarily, understanding the nature and aims of the study and any dangers and obligations involved, so that they are not exposed to risks that are greater than the gains they might derive (Bogdan & Biklen,1992). These ethical practices are the result of improved sensitivity to participant rights and humanitarian practices subsequent to blatant and unacceptable research practices in the past, and are reviewed by appropriate bodies where research and informed consent procedures are a concern (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). These authors argued in taking the role of another their perspective may be learned, but with this comes an obligation to safeguard their information. Sensitivity is required because while issues are easy to circumscribe in theory, it is harder to do this in practice. Bogdan and Biklen identified qualitative research as having particular challenges ethically, because of the relationships, often ongoing, that exist between researchers and participants where both share a similar status that is so different from quantitative detachment. They cited four main ethical considerations: protection of participants' identities, respectful and co-operative treatment, negotiation in the nature of a contract, and truthfulness in report. In the same way that safeguards have been adapted from a positivist viewpoint, to improve qualitative validity ethical guidelines have been developed to best serve the specific parameters of quantitative research. Nonetheless, they are important in defining rigorous and ethical practices in any paradigm because Neuman (2003) argued all research has an ethical-moral dimension and whilst different methodologies demand diverse concerns, all recognise this dimension of research. Inherent in research is the search and

commitment to truth as an ethical imperative, that is in itself a compelling reason for such procedures (Davidson & Tolich, 2003).

In the present study, ethical approval was gained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, where the particular principles defined are: informed participant consent; data confidentiality; minimal harm for all participants; truthfulness and social sensitivity. It is recognised that whilst these procedures initiate ethical processes there is still a need to continue to address ethical issues that emerge during the process of the research, so that whilst codes provide guidance the ultimate conduct depends on the integrity of individual researchers (Neuman, 2003). Not least, these tenets apply to the storing and ultimate destruction of the data within the required timeframe, as well as confidentiality and avoidance of any identification within final reporting. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) emphasised the importance of researchers being responsible in what they record when they interpret data. The authors believed "Ethical questions do not reside narrowly in the realm of how to behave in the field…but are …lifelong obligations to the people who have touched their lives in the course of living the life of a qualitative researcher" (p.55).

Whilst sensitivity is always a requirement in assuring confidentiality within research populations, Tolich and Davidson (1999) identified it as of particular concern in small populations. In this regard there are specific implications for New Zealand, because the intimacy that inevitably occurs makes anonymity difficult to comply with, exemplified by the need to detail a unique event and yet avoid identifying players in the drama. As Tolich and Davidson believed constant surveillance alone is able to counter this, particular measures were taken in the current study to disguise the identities of participants as well as the centres they attended. Once a research design had been approved, procedures were established to conduct the study.

3.5   Procedures: Access to the study field

Selecting participants in a study is an important consideration because as the informants, they provide access to the information required by the researcher. It is therefore the investigator's responsibility to select candidates who are likely to provide access to the most useful data, as well as taking leadership in building relationships with participants that will release its potential. As the aims of the study were conceived out of the researcher's long term interest in the potential for early childhood settings to promote maternal support, it was a logical response to return to this context to investigate support benefits to mothers in an empirical way. Conducting the research within centres is compatible with a field approach, where the research activities operate in a natural setting allowing statements to be made that are authentic and can be applied to real situations. As well, it demonstrates some commitment towards seeing issues through the eyes of the people who operate there because the researcher is also a participant (Hetherington & Parke, 1993).

Robson (1993) explains a selection of participants must be made because it would be neither reasonable nor desirable to survey all individuals in the class under study in the region or country. In accordance with the intent of applying a rigorous approach, accepted sampling protocols were used (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). A non-probability method of participant selection was employed, known as "purposive sampling" where the investigator chose places to conduct the research where the focus, support for mothers, was most likely to occur. Denscombe (1998) argued a feature of qualitative research is that data collection is focused on where it is likely the most information will be found, rather than the whole population. As such this represents the "absolute" size that is useful in terms of information. However, rather than being based upon an ad hoc decision participant selection should be an educated prediction of what the response rate might be, in order to increase the "accuracy" of the findings, rather than following a formula that may not fit the study. At the same time, decision making on the particular sample size amounts to the minimal size feasible in the light of the accuracy expected.

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According to Brotherson (1994) the goal of purposive sampling is to identify information-rich participants with both depth and breadth of experiences who also share commonalities. Denscombe (1998) believed use of non-probability methods that reflect the purposeful choice of participants is acceptable when due to the in-depth information required it is not feasible to cover a larger sample. Purposive sampling uses the researcher's knowledge of where data collection is likely to be most productive. This specific focus brings increased validity to the findings rather than relying on a cross section of information, some of which will have poor qualitative yields. According to Denscombe these measures allow the researcher at least some control over where the most potential information will be found, even if they have little control over the willingness of the respondents.

Dependent on a purposive sampling method, participants for the present study were sought based upon their membership of an early childhood centre, reflecting the purpose of the study to investigate the potential of these services for maternal support. As it was expedient to gain information from more than one perspective, staff as well as mothers, were invited to be participants and it was logical to select them through early childhood centres. There were several considerations that built the rationale for the particular centres ultimately selected. One was that mothers would have more experiences of support if they had greater exposure to its effects. As this made presence in centre an important criterion it eliminated full daycare in favour of sessional services where it was conjectured mothers were more likely to perform rostered duties or stay with their children. Whilst according to Weiss (1990) it presupposed participants would be predominantly middle-class this did not have implications for a qualitative study. A cross-section population was not relevant as centres represented unique settings, rather than generalisation being intended.

In accepting a qualitative view, the researcher's particular insight through working in an early childhood context was advantageous in being able to sample purposively within a familiar environment. Not only did this mean privileged information about service types

was available that was argued by Powell (1997b) as lacking within the general population, but such insight had the potential to increase the validity of the results by allowing assiduous participant selection (Denscombe, 1998). Further, advantage resided in knowledge about location of centres and the ability to gain rapport with centre personnel because of a shared background. Tolich and Davidson (1999) argued these factors are useful in gaining appropriate selection, as well as having already overcome the first obstacle of getting accepted by some of the group, when involved in a familiar setting. The centres selected in the study all allowed easy access being within a close radius of the researcher's residence. According to Tolich and Davidson within an investigator's personal biography is the best place to start any study because it engenders a sense of comfort that cannot help but facilitate subsequent action.

3.6   Procedures: Selection and recruitment of participants

As the choice of participants in the present study was reliant upon their membership of an early childhood centre, services first had to be selected. Whilst sessional centres were chosen purposively on the basis of them potentially yielding the most information another aspect of this was that their diversity could demonstrate a useful variability in support generation. The specific capacity for this was discussed in chapter two where the particular features of the different services are outlined. As only four centres were required for the parameters of the study a further selection needed to be made from the remaining sessional services. As a consequence private kindergartens and Maori or Pacific Island care and education centres were excluded. Operating on the principle of working within an investigator's personal biography (Tolich & Davidson, 2003) they were not environments with which the investigator was either culturally or socially familiar. The centres selected were: a free kindergarten, a playcentre, a community kindergarten and a funded playgroup (a profile of each of the groups may be found in Appendix A). Whilst all centres were sessional in nature there were many other differences between them, with leadership and mothers' presence in the centre being

two major distinctions. In the Playcentre and Playgroup mothers routinely remained throughout the session, whilst mothers in the Kindergartens only stayed initially. The different leadership is discussed in conjunction with selection of staff in the following paragraph. At the outset once four centres had been selected organisational consent was first obtained, if applicable (Appendices B and C), before individual centre management was approached with the same invitations to participate in the study (Appendices B and C). Sales and Folkman (2000) believed the seeking of consent is not just a matter of getting participants to agree and sign. It is also associated with ensuring that necessary information is communicated by the researcher to the participants with an understanding that their needs differ. Participation should not only be voluntary, but a decision not to participate or discontinue participation should not result in any penalty or recriminations. In the study once written agreement was obtained the researcher made contact with the centres and initiated a relationship with staff.

Numerically it was decided that two staff would be selected from each centre, eight in all, as an appropriate sample size for accommodation within the timeframe. Four staff were purposively selected on the basis of being the head-teacher or equivalent. They were then asked to nominate a member of the staff team. It was intended by this choice to capture perspectives from both leading as well as other staff. A distinction needs however to be drawn between the staff of the teacher-led centres (the two Kindergartens and the Playgroup) and those in the parent-led centre, because of the implications leadership had in the study. In the former, all but one staff member (who was completing her degree) were employed as trained teachers. However, as the latter service was a parent co-operative all mothers shared the teaching role interchangeably and were at various stages of their Playcentre training. Therefore the mothers who were approached to take part in the interviews as staff were in one instance the leading mother, whose qualifications met regulation compliance for the centre to function and the other was the mother who had assumed the secretarial role for the centre. In order to distinguish the two leadership styles when necessary throughout the study "staff" refers to the combination of the leadership in both teacher-led and parent-led services. Whereas, "teachers" only applies to leadership in the teacher-led services, "Playcentre

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staff" describes those mothers who were responsible for the co-ordination of the group at the time of the study. In all centres leading staff were targeted, because of their expected knowledge of the centre, but also to include them as participants in the research and facilitate the project. An important aspect of this was informing the centre about the project and helping the researcher with the maternal selection according to the set criteria.

Mothers who met the criteria of the study and expressed interest in the project were invited to participate through the distribution of information sheets (Appendix D). Three mothers were selected from each centre in total, so that there were twelve participant mothers. The number chosen reflected the requirement to interview mothers twice in order to gain information about their changing needs over time. Criteria for maternal selection were as follows:

- Mothers, with first infants so that their experiences of motherhood were new and they were therefore able to make a comparison between their present and former lifestyle.

- Mothers who operated predominantly in a home based role, so that their networks were likely to be more limited.

- Mothers who had recently joined and expected to be at the centre for at least a six month period, and pre-dominantly members of one centre.

Although twelve mothers and eight staff did not constitute a large sample this was in accordance with the qualitative approach which relies on an in-depth view of settings, with a smaller number of participants (Robson, 1993). Full details of the participants and the four early childhood settings are included in the profiles in Appendix A. Distribution and features of the participants are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Early childhood centres and participants

Centre	Staff	Mothers
Free Kindergarten Children 3-5 years, attendance 3-5 half days weekly, mothers only remained initially.	**Joan** (Head teacher, Diploma ECE) **Dorothy** (Diploma ECE)	**Lauren** **Bonny** (from India) **Rosa** (from Sri Lanka) (All mothers rostered roles)
Community Kindergarten Children 3-5 years, attendance 4-5 half days weekly, mothers only remained initially.	**Kit** (Head teacher, Diploma ECE) **Ninette** (Final year Diploma, ECE)	**Tilly** **Nina** **Lily** (from Singapore) (All mothers rostered roles, Nina committee member by second interview)
Playcentre Children 0-5 years, attendance 3 half days weekly, all mothers remained throughout the session.	**Manon** (Leading mother, supervisor, with Playcentre qualifications) **Poppy** (Leading mother, supervisor, with Playcentre qualifications)	**Ailly** (Equipment/committee) **Stephanie** (Treasurer/committee) **Martel** (Committee) (All three also supervisors)
Playgroup Children 0-3 years, attendance 1 half day weekly, all mothers remained throughout the session.	**Nettie** (Head teacher, affiliated organisation of Playgroup, Diploma ECE) **Louise** (Diploma ECE)	**Wenda** (No role) **Shirley** (Librarian by second interview) **Rita** (from India, no role)

3.7 Procedures: Initial contact with centres and informed consent

At the outset of the project the researcher spent some time in each centre in turn, meeting staff and parents, observing and taking field notes and generally becoming familiar with the different environments. According to Hetherington and Parke (1993) such sessions are useful in helping alleviate guarded behaviour in the presence of a stranger resulting in improved communication. At this time the project was advertised and information sheets distributed so that parents were aware of the reason for the presence of the researcher, irrespective of whether they met the project criteria or not Mothers who did meet the criteria and showed interest in participating indicated this by responding to "tear off" sheets, or to staff after reading one of the information sheets. Their wishes were then communicated to the researcher, who made a follow-up phone call. If criteria were appropriate, arrangements were made to meet either before or at the interview. An immediate start to the project was called for with regard to the maternal interviews, because of the need to include two interviews with each mother with a time lapse in between. It was then proposed to interview staff. However, in practice anxieties about maternal recruitment were well-founded. These were based on several reasons. Mothers were less accessible than staff. Not being involved in management they were not part of the initial introductions when the centre was approached. Also there were few mothers in any of the centres that initially met the selection criteria, particularly the requirement for *first time mothers*. The latter was considered non-negotiable because it was expected that the impact of first time motherhood would not be so well remembered with subsequent children. Most families enrolled in centres (particularly the kindergartens where children were older) had at least one or two siblings. Consequently there were delays waiting for new enrolments where mothers did meet the selection criteria. Meanwhile informed consent procedures and staff interviews were conducted. As they drew to a close the difficulties associated with recruiting mothers became more acute. As these maternal interviews could not be delayed any longer because of the need to interview mothers twice, a decision was taken to review the criteria for their selection. Whilst being a first time mother was retained, the length of time mothers had attended their centre was extended. Whilst this boosted recruitment it still did not meet sample

requirements. Several other strategies were considered including building relationships with another free kindergarten with a view to recruitment of three more mothers, as well as approaching the Playgroup already involved in the study. The latter case was considered because as the Playgroup operated under the umbrella organisation of a community kindergarten, the staff worked in both the Playgroup as well as the kindergarten. As there was only one more interview required, approaching the kindergarten seemed preferable to building relationships with a new playgroup. However, in the final outcome enough mothers were recruited from the original centres on the basis of new enrolments.

3.8   Procedures: Data collection through interviews, diaries and environmental field notes

Interviews with mothers and teachers were chosen as a method of generating data because they offer good opportunities for gaining quality, disclosure type information within a one to one relationship and are particularly relevant within small sample populations. This was in accordance with Davidson and Tolich (2003) who reported all social science methods as being based on some variation of asking questions. As well, Denscombe (1998) argued the interview method yields more information from fewer subjects rather than limited information from a wide survey. Interviews generate enough information for a reasonable level of validity as well as accounting for the emotions, experiences and feelings of personal information. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) defined an interview as a "purposeful conversation" (p.96), the purpose being for the investigator to gather information in their own words and to develop insights on how chosen participants interpret some part of the world. Reinharz (1992) believed interviewing as a technique was particularly suited to female researchers, as it draws on the skills of the traditional female role, even believing for a woman interviewee to be properly understood it may be necessary for her to be interviewed by a woman. Oakley (1992) advocated likewise for the mutual outcome that interviewing can be seen to constitute a

socially supportive experience in itself.

Interviews were semi structured, allowing for answering the study questions, but also reducing restrictions in order to encourage unexpected findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Along with this Hammersley (1992) advocated the importance of the researcher who has previously been in the field extending their view rather than become lulled into the complacency of the familiar. The interview method was also strengthened by being applied across time as well as across groups. Not only did this allow for both mothers' and staff perspectives to be taken into account and compared, but also for mothers' experiences to be considered on more than one occasion. These measures were advocated by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) and Cohen and Manion (1989) not only in order to enrich the data, but also to increase the validity of the results. Bogdan and Biklen confirmed second interviews anyway have an advantage over first interviews. They are inevitably better contrived in the light of the data already considered, whereas first interviews are usually more open in content. As well, because participants are more familiar with the process they are more relaxed. It was intended to interview mothers twice within a minimum period of six months based on the study timeframe, also allowing for mothers' initial adjustment to centre life before they were invited to participate in the project. When mothers agreed to be interviewed they also selected a time and place to meet. They were given the choice of being interviewed at the centre, or in another place, with half deciding on meeting at the centre. Time was spent first in establishing a rapport that according to Brotherson (1994) is the basis of comfortable and productive exchange. Interviews were held in a private place and informed consent procedures were conducted (Appendix E) prior to mothers receiving a copy of the interview questions (Appendix F). The interviews were conducted and audio-taped, with mothers also receiving a copy of the diary (Appendix G) with instructions as to its use and the need for it to be brought to the second interview. Shipman (1988) believed the way evidence is produced is integral to the credibility of the research and this is very much improved by the investigator explaining the procedures in detail so that participants are able to explore all possibilities with the medium. The use of the diary

was monitored during the time lapse between interviews through telephone exchange that had the additional purpose of maintaining contact until the second interview. First interviews were transcribed immediately and coded, to inform the second interview, after the transcriber had signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix H).

Due to the difficulties associated with maternal recruitment, interviewing mothers for the second time was also a prolonged process. However, this was less of an issue than had first been thought as data analysis proceeded throughout the interviewing process. The intention was to allow as long as possible between mothers' first and second interviews (within the constraints of the study time frame) in order for change to be feasible. Interviews were eventually conducted seven to eight months apart. As one Playgroup mother had left the district unexpectedly after the first interview and could not be traced through former networks, a replacement had to be found. Apart from this, all other mothers were happy to meet the interviewer again as agreed at the first interview as well as bringing their diary. Mothers had already completed informed consent procedures so at the second interview they were given a copy of the questions (Appendix I) that were discussed along with the diaries. Mothers were also given a copy of the diaries for themselves.

Diaries were chosen as a complementary method of data collection to interviews in the study because unlike interviews they do not operate on the basis of recall, having the capacity to capture information at the point in time when it occurs. C. Nachmias and D. Nachmias (1985) confirmed the usefulness of diaries as they pick up on the minutiae of everyday life that is not necessarily remembered after a few days. Being spontaneous they provide a firsthand account of the individual's life experiences and as private records they offer particular insights. Diaries are well documented in research methodology. Davidson and Tolich (2003) described them as "useful tools" although an unconventional method. Originating in consumer expenditure surveys as well as in health research where they were found to be useful strategies for patients to record symptoms and health events as they occurred. Diaries were first used in the Baltimore

Morbidity survey conducted in the Eastern Health District of Baltimore from 1938-1943 (Walsh, 1977). They have been used subsequently in many other fields of social research registering daily social interactions (Butz & Alexander, 1991). In the study it was hoped that they would pick up on the minutiae of everyday life that is not necessarily remembered after a few days, yet according to McCubbin and Patterson (1983) is instrumental in shaping individuals' lives more consistently than significant life events. The semi-structuring of the diaries was prescribed to provide help but make them the least possible inconvenience to mothers who would be expected to record in them at least several times a week. Mothers were told that whilst immediate recording was preferred, there was no penalty for not doing this and if they forgot they could still record events later but this needed to be indicated. These provisions were implemented because Konzal (2000) cautioned time to write is a major barrier for most of the population. It is something that is not easily resolved, and it is important that researchers create the conditions necessary for participants to be involved. The diaries produced mixed results. Whilst they were overwhelmingly successful with a minority of mothers, they were marginally so with others. In particular migrant mothers for whom English was a second language did not record anything in their diaries although had initially been confident about doing so.

The recruitment of staff interviews went very smoothly. Familiarity with the project accelerated their understanding of it and as soon as they had received individual information sheets (Appendix J) arrangements were made for them to be interviewed. All but the Playcentre staff chose to be interviewed at their centre and subsequent to the same standard personal informed consent forms as mothers being signed (Appendix E) and interview question sheets (Appendix K) being offered, interviews were accomplished during a relatively short period of time. Interviews were taped and transcribed immediately before being considered within the pool of data.

Another aspect of data collection (in deference to the multiple method approach) was observation of the physical environment recorded as field notes. The use of field notes

as a supplementary way to gain information was confirmed by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) as a good method to employ in conjunction with interviewing techniques. Adler (1993) who also advocated this type of observation emphasised its value lies in the systematic and purposive nature of the researcher's approach that distinguishes them from those of the everyday participants. Neuman (2003) agreed that it encapsulates much of what researchers do, that is: Pay attention and watch and listen carefully, so that ultimately they become an instrument that absorbs all sources of information from within the environment. Neuman believed as the core of social life is communicated through the mundane, trivial everyday minutiae of life, researchers need to recognise this as physical aspects of the environment can express messages that affect social interaction. Bogdan and Biklen were convinced that researchers often undervalue and exclude these aspects of the natural setting because of outcomes that sometimes represent unrealistically glowing pictures of how the organisation functions. However, the authors believed this was part of the acceptance that the researcher is not looking for objectivity, but is interested in how the situation is defined by people involved in the operation of the community.

In the present study the main foci for observation of centre environments were: displays, notices and written information for parents as well as parent space. Observations were conducted during times when the researcher was gaining familiarity with the centre as well as when visiting for interviewing purposes. Neuman (2003) advocated the researcher subordinating their personal wants to the demands of the research site, as this yields benefits. The author advocated time is never wasted as rhythms of the site as well as serendipitous detail may be noticed at such times. In the study field notes were recorded on site with subsequent prompt reading and notation. Tolich and Davidson (1999) recommended this technique because whilst field notes take different forms: short notes, "head jottings" (when it is not feasible to write), all must be written up immediately afterwards and expanded into full writing. However, Fetterman (1989) cautioned whilst detail is important, the researcher should strive for succinct notes about significant factors to guard against collecting an overload of information. The author

believed this not only results in irrelevant material being collected, but is also associated with subsequent difficulties generated eventually through unwieldy quantities of data.

As a sequel to data collection it was important to bring closure to the participants in terms of the entrustment of data and inclusion of the researcher in their daily life at the study centres. It was appreciated that whilst the researcher was fully conversant with the progress of the project, this was not the case for the participants. Accordingly small tokens of appreciation were given to each mother to thank them for their sustained participation during the second interview. A host verification procedure was also conducted after the interviews to gain confirmation from the participants that the transcripts met with their approval as a record, also that they were happy for any of the information to be included in the data analysis according to the original informed consent procedures. Carr and Kemmis (1983), Delamont (1992), Lincoln and Guba (2002) and Silverman (1993) all advocate this measure as adding validity to the methodology. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) believed it generated credibility because the inclusion of the participants' verification allowed for insights otherwise not gained because they always have additional knowledge unknown to the researcher.

3.9   Procedures: Analysis of data

The following section in chapter three describes the processes involved in coding and analysing the data. There were three main data sets. They included transcribed material from the 24 maternal interviews as well as diary entries. As the primary source of data mothers' results are reported in chapter four. The third source of supporting material came from staff interviews and is documented in chapter five. Questions were parallel across mothers' and staff interviews (where appropriate) in order to draw comparisons between the different perspectives. As well environmental field notes were thematically analysed, as were also the verification focus groups. They informed the iterative process from which emerged six theoretical propositions.

Coding was systematic and began immediately after the first data were generated, allowing orientation and identification of initial trends according to Strauss (1987). Neuman (2003) believed this is an advantage of qualitative research, that it can be adjusted to better accommodate outcomes than quantitative data that are fixed in the design from the outset. Neuman described qualitative research as progressing in distinct cycles so that analysed data produces results that are then reformulated to advise and revise the research prompts, even to the extent of changing the whole focus of the study. Neuman concluded if these cycles did not operate, researchers would never be able to handle the volumes of data.

Eisenhardt (2002) allowed that whilst there is no standard way for an analysis to begin, a typical approach for case studies includes within-case profiles and write-ups for each site. Accordingly in the present study, centre profiles were constructed as a place to begin, forming the basis of an initial understanding of their diverse structures (Appendix A). Eisenhardt believed it was useful to list comparisons that force the researcher to discover the subtle similarities and differences between cases. Prior to analysis in the present study interviews were transcribed. As this was by someone other than the researcher it created potential for decreased validity requiring safeguards to be implemented because according to Mason (1996) transcripts are not impartial. In effect they represent an inadequate record of non-verbal aspects of the interaction, even when field notes are added, but also because the researcher and the transcriber make judgements about them. Whilst the qualitative approach in the study allowed for acceptance of this social interference, precautions were taken to ensure discretion through a confidentiality agreement (Appendix J), as well as increased validity by ensuring that the researcher was familiar with the taped material rather than relying entirely on the transcriptions. These measures helped to increase the likelihood that the interpretation was at least based on the original discourse rather than on someone else's representation. Silverman (1993) supported the view believing transcription is a stage in the research process when interpretation easily occurs, and this needs to be considered. Having an overload of information at this stage was recognised by Bogdan and Biklen

(1992) who attributed this to the nature of qualitative research. At the same time according to Fetterman (1989) whilst this is testing of the analyst as much as the data it is entirely commensurate with the intent. Fetterman believed it was not logical to completely reduce data to a formula as might be done in a quantitative approach as this will nullify the emphasis on interpretation, denying the original aim to view the phenomenon in an in-depth way. In the present study, being aware of overload as a possible outcome, the researcher attempted to safeguard against this by developing a specific design to start with and semi-structured questions for the interviews. However, despite these precautions there was still a considerable amount of data to be processed.

3.9.1 Procedures: Coding processes

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) defined data analysis as the process of systematic searching and arranging resultant material from the various instruments to increase understanding of them and to enable the researcher to organise the mass of information into manageable units. The process then facilitates the synthesising and searching for patterns. Amongst other things it means deciding what is important, as well as what can be learned and ultimately what will be told to others. Miles and Huberman (1984) reported analysis of data as often the least accomplished area for many researchers, reflecting a chasm of separation between the data collected to the final conclusions. Coding is the accepted way of organising the material. Robson (1993) recommended just as stringent measures to achieve a corresponding degree of rigor in analysing qualitative as quantitative data. Accordingly in the present study, a recognised method of coding was sought that would maintain design integrity. Data were subjected to a coding method designed by Strauss (1987) that defines three kinds of qualitative data analysis that are integrated into a single approach, namely: *open coding, axial coding* and *selective coding*. The main aim is reviewing and examining initial codes, organising ideas and themes and identifying the axis of key concepts. During this phase causes, consequences, conditions, interactions, strategies and processes are the inquiry. The

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final stage of data coding is selective coding, where the investigator looks for significance in and elaboration on the organised themes. Strauss' coding method is rigorous because it takes full advantage of the potential information by making three passes through the data. According to Schwandt (1997) this encourages an in-depth reflective view ensuring that findings do not remain at a descriptive level, guarding against the researcher not being analytical, because if coding is treated as a purely mechanical process codes remain fixed and inflexible, resulting in failure to develop new insights, or theory.

In the present study whilst the interviews represented the main method of data collection to be coded according to the Strauss method, diaries and field notes were also subjected to the same approach. Firstly open coding was applied by reading through the data and lifting repeated themes to the surface from a low level of abstraction. These were entered into tabulated form (Appendices L and M) prior to the second phase of axial coding. According to Strauss (1987) this establishes the axis of the results. In the study it entailed focusing on the already organised set of codes or preliminary concepts instead of the mass of raw data from which they were drawn, although Strauss stressed it does not preclude additional ideas spontaneously emerging. In the present study it was exemplified by frequent recourse to original data when this occurred, commensurate with Flick (2002) who described it as an iterative process when the researcher oscillates back and forth in combining the data.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) stressed even with a stringent method of coding the analyst will still be faced with many decisions as the analysis proceeds. Not the least of these is preserving the integrity of the original information. It is important to do this because it represents knowledge entrusted to the researcher, as well as being important for the truthfulness of the results to preserve the sense. Data consist of words that are context based and can therefore have multiple meanings that reflect the complexity of social life. Strauss (1987) advocated whilst the aim was to organise a large quantity of specific details into a coherent picture, or set of interlocked concepts, at the same time this

should not be done at the expense of the data where colour and integrity are lost. Once an analysis is progressing Strauss suggested explanations need to be divided into two main categories of highly unlikely and plausible. As only a few explanations will be consistent with a pattern in the data, it is possible to eliminate material by showing a wide array of evidence contradicts it. Eisenhardt (2002) believed once material is organised narrative description may be coupled with figures or graphs providing copious systems to accommodate individual researcher needs.

3.10   Theory building

A feature of qualitative research is that it has inductive principles that incorporate the idea of theory generation as an outcome of data collection and analysis. Davidson and Tolich (2003) defined theories in social science as providing explanations of behaviour rather than as a starting point as is commensurate with quantitative methodologies. Eisenhardt's (2002) view was that they offer good understandings of the dynamics that underpin relationships. According to Neuman (2003) theories specify whether and how concepts relate to each as well as why the relationship does or does not exist. Davidson and Tolich described theory and research as interdependent in the way they create and sustain each other as the researcher moves from observation of phenomena through to patterns and finally generalisations and theories. According to Eisenhardt (2002) shaping hypotheses in theory building research is involved with measuring constructs and verifying relationships rather than applying deductive statistical verification. But instead of this being seen as a disadvantage, it is compensated for by readers being able to apply their own standards because they have a full account of the evidence and procedures at their disposal. Strauss (1987) believed qualitative analysis had a particular quality in being closer to raw data. According to Yin (1994) the generation of theory entails an iterative process where there is a continual testing of ideas and a need to return to different aspects of the analysis in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the eventual outcomes.

The organisation of what can be an extensive body of data in qualitative methodologies represents an important part of the research. Once the analysis is complete, ways of presenting it in the most useful manner must be explored. At the same time the whole exercise has been projected towards gaining some understanding about a particular phenomenon and as this has been an inductive process, theory is the expected outcome. When this emerges as a complexity of interrelated concepts one of the ways it can be expressed is through the use of theoretical or causal statements, termed propositions (Neuman, 2003). Neuman argued concepts are contained in theories and the researcher needs to deepen their understanding of these by identifying the assumptions upon which they are based. The use of propositions is an effective way of setting out the proposed theories as they provide a way to discuss the results in a structured way identifying connections between variables, so that it may be seen how the variation in one concept occurs according to the variation in another. C. Nachmias and D. Nachmias (1985) whilst agreeing propositions have only limited explanatory or predictive powers found them to be an acceptable starting point. The authors described them as a theoretical system, interrelated in a way that permits some aspects to be derived from others and representing a stage in the analysis when it may be claimed that the phenomenon at hand has been explained.

Eisenhardt (2002) recommended a further and essential feature of theory building includes a comparison of the concepts ideas and theory that emerge from the data with the research literature. The author argued this should reflect challenges to the emergent theory as well as agreement because it allows the researcher to re-visit suppositions and re-frame thinking. Such activity can promote even further insight into the underpinnings of these assumptions, both from the viewpoint of the emergent theory as well as the conflicting literature. Apart from the satisfaction gained through being better informed on the findings of the project, this process also increases the validity and therefore the credibility of the developed theory. In the current study there was no directly conflicting literature to challenge emergent theory, although there were unexpected areas of interest that suggested particular emphases not previously envisaged that required a further

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literature search. In the present study a system of twelve propositions was originally developed (Appendix N). They represented assumptions made about the nature of support for mothers in the early childhood centres in the study, as a result of inductive logic, in the way that the end product of qualitative research is the development of formal theory. During the continuing iterative process operating at the time of organising the presentation of the findings the interrelatedness of the propositions suggested they could be reduced still further. The logic for doing this was to make the theory more succinct and therefore more useful in organising the results. At the same time, it had potential to communicate the theory more clearly to others, thereby making it stronger. As it was already known that the concepts within the theories were related, the process by which the reduction from 12 to 6 propositions was achieved began by considering how the relationships operated. As an aspect of this, it was necessary to return to the original research questions that prompted the investigation and for which it was expected the theory generated would provide some answers. Research question one focused on support gained by mothers and in considering the related theory in the 12 original propositions, support was identified in three of these as being the result of mothers' active contribution. Whilst proposition six (of the original 12) stated this idea, propositions one and two whilst further describing the requirements for mothers to make this active response, were really only emitting the same theoretical concept that *support is contingent upon the active contribution of the mothers themselves*. It was therefore logical to combine these three propositions and in so doing, sharpen the focus of proposition one (in the final set of six) as the culmination of findings associated with research question one. Likewise, the other nine propositions were treated similarly, representing the continual process of refinement advocated by Neuman (2003) that served to confirm more closely the concepts involved, thus developing an even greater confidence in the final six propositions. The process by which data were systematically coded and analysed into patterns from which firstly twelve and then six propositions emerged is represented in figure 2.

Figure 2 Flow chart: Theory generation, the process of development of a set of six propositions from the original 12.
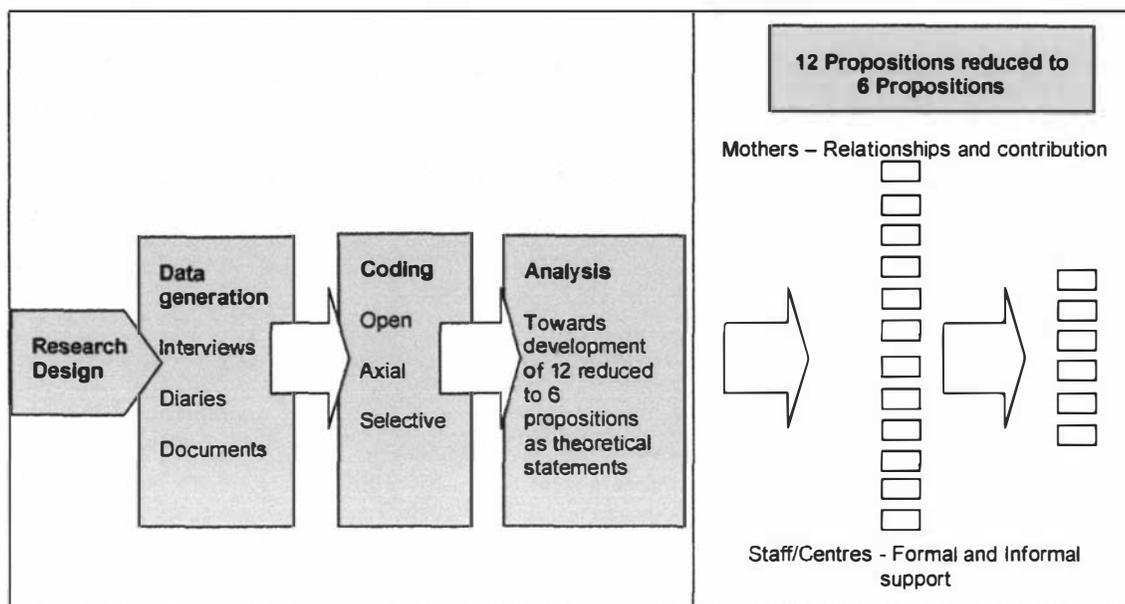
3.11 Verification of data interpretation through focus group interviews

As a further measure for testing out the credibility of the emergent theory it was decided to convene focus groups to verify the author's interpretation of the data analysis. As this was in addition to the original research design and involved gaining informed consent an application for further ethical approval needed to be made. Neuman (2003) argued such measures need to be taken as verification is commensurate with qualitative methodologies. They have the advantage of flexibility that allows them to be particularly responsive to the needs of emergent information. According to Brotherson (1994) focus groups are group interviews that capitalise on multiple interactions to gain data and insights that would otherwise be less obtainable. When used for verification they have a particular strength as they can provide clarification (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). Their strength as a method resides in being able to elicit multiple perspectives and produce a considerable amount of information in a short space of time. By being in

natural settings they allow relaxed free expression within normal social exchange. Participants may query each other so that groups challenge one another's viewpoints without the direction of the researcher, eliciting useful insight.

Brotherson recommended six to seven members within a focus group. This is a manageable number of participants for the researcher to facilitate, as well as letting participants have an acceptable amount of time to put forward their viewpoints, yet still allowing enough opportunity for debate. When the group is too small issues may arise where participants may feel inhibited and exposed when interacting. The author suggested over recruiting in order to have an appropriate session, as the number of people who ultimately attend focus groups is unpredictable. The length of interviews should allow time for discussion, with 90 minutes being suggested by Neuman (2003).

3.11.1 Selection of participants and organisation of focus groups

As the original participant sample in the study consisted of mothers and staff focus groups, this dictated the parameters for selection of the focus groups. Two groups were decided upon in order to allow discussion around the expected different perspectives of the two sets of participants. They were convened separately to prevent either group being inhibited in their discussion by the views of the other. The same technique was used by Billman et al. (2004) in order to elicit different perspectives of staff and mothers. Brotherson (1994) believed participants need common ground to establish rapport and an association with the topic. In the current context participants needed knowledge about parent involvement in early childhood centres. Other participants, rather than those who were involved in the study were preferred, as they represented a further network of opinions. This was commensurate with the multiple method approach that exposes more about the chosen phenomenon than would be experienced through single views (Neuman, 2003). Selection of participants for the two focus groups was based on the researchers' own networks, using Sarantakos (1993) "snowball approach"

to participant selection where one participant suggests another. The process was chosen as it represented a feasible way of drawing a group together at a late stage in the study without the complexities involved in having to approach different early childhood centres. Neuman (2003) argued the researcher's personal biography is a good place to start in this context. Accordingly, mothers were recruited from a Plunket coffee group. These represent an innovation of the Plunket Society (established in 1907 by Truby King and one of the first groups in New Zealand to support mothers and babies) to generate networking amongst new mothers and provide naturally occurring support. Mothers in the coffee group selected by the researcher from her personal networks were representative of three different early childhood affiliations comprising: playcentre, daycare and kindergarten. Early childhood staff were selected through a professional organisation that had the same diversity of experience in service contexts. Information sheets (Appendix O) were sent to the potential participants through the spokesperson for the individual groups and upon receipt of an agreement e-mail arrangements were made to meet for the group interview. Both focus groups were conducted at venues where and when members regularly met, so that not only were they in familiar environments but focus groups represented the least possible disruption to participants confirmed as ideal by Brotherson (1994). Informed consent procedures (Appendix P) were first conducted prior to the participants being invited to discuss the findings and verify the researcher's interpretation. For this purpose overheads were prepared of figure 4, (chapter seven, p. 238) as well as a summary of the findings that led to the view that mothers' support needs were met through both formal and informal social systems (Appendix Q). Insights gained as a result of the focus groups are included in chapter seven as strengthening the theoretical propositions that were outcomes of the study. The findings from which these emerged are documented in the following two results chapters.

3.12   Summary

Chapter three has documented the development of the study design. For this, reference

was made to the methodological literature and attention paid to gaining credibility for the results through measures for increasing validity. A qualitative methodology was selected as most appropriate for an in-depth investigation that set out with the purpose of identifying ways mothers gain support through their involvement with early childhood centres. Interviewing of mothers and staff, post informed consent procedures represented the major data collection processes. Mothers, as the main focus, were interviewed twice, as well as keeping a diary. Coding and analysis proceeded immediately and environmental field notes informed the iterative process from which developed six propositions. The researcher returned to the field in order to verify data interpretation through the medium of two focus groups. The results of data analyses are the subject of chapters four and five, beginning with the maternal findings that constituted the primary data source of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS
PRESENTED AS A SET OF PROPOSITIONS (1-3)

4.1   Introduction to the results chapters: Research questions 1-3

Chapter four focuses on the mothers' findings that were the primary source of data in the study. It is followed in chapter five by the results appertaining to staff as the supporting data. Data were collected from three main sources including: interviews with staff and mothers; diaries recorded by mothers and environmental field notes. Of these mothers' interviews and diaries were primary and the others confirmatory sources of data. The findings are reported according to the logical order of the original six research questions, with three questions in chapter four and three in chapter five. Data categories are visually represented in tables prior to the discussion of individual research questions. The data for each question are summarised and culminate in a proposition or theoretical statement, ending with a chapter summary. Quotations citing evidence are cross-referenced between chapters four and five. Chapter four goes on to present evidence that mothers did gain effective support that met their incremental needs through membership of their early childhood centres. Support occurred specifically as a result of mothers' actively seeking membership of an early childhood centre, followed by relationship building and contribution to the community. Evidence in this chapter will show that effective support was dependent on centre responses in establishing a suitable environment for mothers' activities. Chapter four discusses the detail of these findings beginning with the first research question.

4.2   Research question 1:

To what degree do mothers believe they need and gain personal support as a result of being members of an early childhood centre?

Table 2

Significant themes relevant to research question 1: To what degree do mothers believe they need and gain personal support as a result of being members of an early childhood centre?

Support relationship	Support type needed/gained by mothers
Staff	Easily accessed knowledge/empathy at centre induction
Staff	Educational learning experiences for their child
Staff	Relationship building, space/facilities/social functions
Staff	Maternally initiated professional help/advice
Staff	Choice/self-determination for active contribution to centre
Peers	Information/empathy/companionship/practical help
Staff and peers	Accessible educational/authentic general knowledge
Staff and peers	Knowledge of New Zealand language and culture
Staff and peers	Accessible knowledge of community services

Table 2 shows the themes of the types of support mothers sought and gained as a result of their membership of an early childhood centre. The ideas these provoke are discussed as a response to research question one. As indicated in the above table mothers gained benefits by building relationships with staff and peers through whom they were able to make a meaningful contribution, establishing support as an active rather than a passive process. As a consequence mothers were most able to engage in these activities when they could practise self-determination in a socially co-operative environment. In the study there were contrasting experiences between mothers attending a teacher-led or a parent-led service. The reason for this was that the inherent structure and presence of only one social group in the parent-led service established it upon collaborative principles. Consequently mothers were able to manipulate the environment to their own advantage without opposition. However, in the teacher-led centres where social co-operation was optional rather than inevitable, the presence of two social groups, both

mothers and teachers made for a more complex system. Teachers were employed as leaders and their professional attitudes towards trained knowledge had forged a power differential that did not encourage shared decision-making.

Whilst the idea that mothers were active providers of their own support (given responsive circumstances) appeared to be in contrast with their perceived vulnerability, it was actually important in attracting an empathetic response from staff and other more experienced mothers. At the same time it presents compelling evidence that whilst mothers are well-equipped to access support they are still dependent upon relationship building within their communities because of its contingency upon a favourable environment. Chapter four continues with a discussion on mothers' active role in gaining support, through building relationships and making a contribution to their centre. It is presented in the context of maternal variables and those related to centre response.

4.2.1 Relationship building as mothers' primary support goal

Mothers gained support through the social interactions they had with staff and parents within their early childhood community. These relationships were initially useful in helping them to understand the culture and routines of their centre, as without this knowledge they were unable to make a contribution. Rather than occurring by chance, relationships were not only anticipated but actively sought after by mothers. This was evident from the initial socially driven selection of an early childhood centre. Stephanie described the process in chapter four, p.115. At the same time Ailly (Playcentre) illustrated the need for personal responsibility in support provision:

> *It's up to you to be your own motivation. You've got to try and make other people make it better for you. You've got to make it for you. It's your destiny, not other people trying to make it work for you. You've got to make the best of your own situation.*

Once mothers had taken the initial step of selecting a centre that they believed was compatible with their social needs this placed them in a position to seek supportive good fit relationships. Their next requirement was exposure to a range of mothers, as possible friendship partners, in a warm comfortable atmosphere that boosted their confidence to initiate connections. Kindergarten mothers were most favoured by the increased choice offered by the larger rolls. The much smaller numbers in the Playcentre made leading mothers more circumspect in establishing their community through careful selection of members. The whole process of relationship building took time that pre-supposed a designated place where mothers could meet and negotiate the early stages of the new relationships before the early friendships were advanced enough that they could become independent of the centre premises.

Undoubtedly centres' provision of parent meeting space was pivotal in supporting friendships. It was an issue from the beginning as soon as mothers began to interact socially with other members of their early childhood community. The way staff responded to factors outside their control, such as non-purpose built facilities, reflected the value placed upon parent presence in the various programmes as well as an acknowledgement that parents have different needs to children. Space was always limited and none of the centres had any exclusively set aside for parent use, although there were shared areas, invariably the kitchen or foyer, on small chairs with the children, or on outside seating. Wenda (Playgroup) described her attempt to be pro-active about parent space:

> *Before I came here I don't think a lot of people sat at tables with their kid and I*
> *thought maybe I have started something. I think everyone used to hide in the*
> *kitchen. You don't really get to sit and talk. Even if you do you have to sort of*
> *squish into a little chair, but at least you're talking to the other mums. The*
> *mothers otherwise always talk outside.*

Ninette (Community Kindergarten staff) commented on parent space as non-optimal:

It does rain and it is freezing sometimes. Another thing it's quite cold in here. If the sun is out you're outside. It depends on the weather, but I think parents are more relaxed outside. A lot of parents find the noise here (with wooden floors) quite deafening.

Whilst Ninette and other teachers realised the space inadequacies they did not seek remedies because they saw mothers as only fleetingly at the centre and because they took no responsibility for their friendships they expected mothers met elsewhere. Nettie (Playgroup, staff) commented:

I wouldn't say they actually participate in the programme. They probably sit more and talk. I don't really encourage them to sit down and chat.

The inference here was that teachers saw parents' role in the centre as related to supporting the teachers in a child-focused programme rather than being there on any business of their own.

Building relationships placed a heavy emphasis on good communication of information. In the teacher-led centres this entailed reading a lot of written information. Both field notes as well as interviews recorded the heavy reliance teachers placed on this method of communication. The delivery was motivated by difficulties associated with relaying large bodies of repetitious material to parents on a regular basis, given the time constraints of their role. Parents received a detailed handbook at induction as well as regular newsletters and other information was relayed through their "pockets". It was problematic because of the sheer volume, as well as the lack of facilities for discussion and feedback, that was particularly an issue for migrant mothers. The problems that were found to be associated with communication conducted through written text are discussed in more detail in chapter five (p.160).

Written information overload was particularly crucial at enrolment when mothers were unable to initiate support through a lack of information about how the centre operated.

The inadequacy of written transmission was evident when contrasted with the verbal approach in the Playcentre. Here the process of induction was markedly accelerated because of the need to induct mothers immediately in order to fit them to assume responsible roles and it was recognised that written communication was ineffectual for this in the short time frame available. It was an example of effective support when mothers' needs and those of the centre were aligned. The Playcentre was more able to comment verbally because of the small membership. Ailly recalled her induction:

> *I was talking for an hour and a half asking about the real ins and outs of Playcentre. My first question was what's the training? How much do I have to do? Do you have to make the playdough at home?*

Ailly also described how the Playcentre was aware of the difficulties associated with written information because of the considerable commitment mothers were required to make:

> *We do have an introduction leaflet that the centre is trying to work through and originally it was a few pages long... (now) putting this in front of a new person is going to scare them off...and there was (particularly) one line in there (that is off-putting, it says) ...when you're rostered on you're cleaning two hours on the weekend and I said well a new person reading two hours on the weekend they're probably not going to want to join because of those couple of words. I know I wanted to make sure they weren't going to want you to do a lot of things in your own time for the centre. I'm still keeping that thing at bay.*

Another way mothers' induction was accelerated in the Playcentre showing increased support by centres when the interests of the service were concerned, was a "buddy system". Poppy (Playcentre staff) explained:

> *A new person before they come is assigned a buddy and then they will be introduced to the buddy when they come in. The buddy will introduce them to the*

other people and help them settle and answer any questions, but we make it quite
clear they can ask anybody. They don't just talk to their buddy.

The initiation and development of relationships that mothers actively pursued as the
underlying basis of support is discussed in detail later in the chapter (p.127).

4.2.2   Gaining confidence prior to contribution

Irrespective of the degree to which mothers anticipated support and were motivated to
seek it out through building relationships, they were unable to access it until they were
confident in the knowledge of the culture and routines specific to the particular
organisation. Not unexpectedly, because the first relationships mothers initiated were
with teachers they were the first informants. Consequently knowledge of how to
contribute began to develop from first contact within the structures of the formal
induction processes of the particular centre. The response that mothers' encountered is
discussed in more detail with reference to the predominant use of written information in
centres (chapter five, p.109). The initial confidence building defined a period of low
support for mothers as they coped with an initial chaos and sense of disempowerment
inevitably encountered before they were familiar with the centre. Mothers gained
information through staff both written and verbal, as well as through exchange with their
peers and observation of others' actions. Wenda (Playgroup) illustrated the latter:

> *Before I came here I was like, you know how you put things off because you*
> *think something new! Ooh scary! Because you're a first time mum you learn*
> *from what other people are doing and you think oh yeah, they leave straight*
> *after or they do this. You see what other people are doing.*

Apart from the exchange of information an important promoter of mothers' mastery
over the new environment was the warm atmosphere generated by teachers. It was
important because it attracted mothers to remain and engage with the centre for future

benefits that were not necessarily apparent during the unsettling time of first encounter. Not only was this important for them, but also for centre enrolment. Nina (Community Kindergarten) commented on how the centre atmosphere impacted upon her sense of confidence and wellbeing:

> *(The centre) it's quite open and friendly. You're made to feel comfortable there and involved. I think the teachers have a lot to do with it. They're always approachable and relaxed. They never seem ultra highly stressed.*

Dorothy (Free Kindergarten, staff) showed that staff were not only aware but also promoters of a welcoming atmosphere:

> *I think the atmosphere within an early childhood centre is all important and I think if it's a really relaxed and welcoming environment people will want to stay...mothers know when they go their child is well looked after, that everything is done in a way that they feel comfortable and I think it has a spin off for us too that if there is an accident or something happens, they have complete trust in us and the first reaction would be it wasn't your fault.*

Dorothy's comment illustrated the very strong symbiotic relationship in centres where the needs of mothers, staff and centres were frequently served simultaneously. This was significant in terms of mothers' support, because they gained increased benefits when staff motivation to meet child and centre needs coincided with their own.

4.2.3 Child adjustment a first focus for mothers

Intertwined with mothers' need to understand the centre operation was their simultaneous pre-occupation with their child's adjustment. The very close relationship meant that until their child was settled mothers were unable to concentrate on their own needs. In the kindergartens this meant leaving their child and whilst mothers made their

own provision they were still reliant upon teachers to support the transition. Teachers were very confident at doing this through their experiences of the cyclical nature of centre life and were highly motivated to have the child settled into routines. These encounters, that whilst teachers' were focused upon the needs of the child, also gave mothers peace of mind represented dual support a very effective form of coincidental benefits. They were particularly evident during the first period of induction into centre life that represented the most intense period of teacher support, but continued intermittently throughout centre life until the transition to school. Whilst for most mothers the adjustment was relatively uncomplicated, for some it represented an ongoing trauma. Nina (Community kindergarten) explained her anxieties:

> *When I leave he gets real sticky and upset...I did leave him one day and I got home and Kit (staff) phoned me and said you had better come back. By the time I got there he'd vomited everywhere because he gets himself really upset and when he's upset he vomits...he's only just turned three, I'm in no hurry (to leave him).*

In extreme cases, when teachers had employed their repertoire of routine strategies for settling children and they were still not well engaged with centre routines, they left mothers to their own devices that sometimes resulted in mothers remaining in the session with their child for lengthy periods. When the situation was not resolved mothers sometimes left the service altogether. Whilst overtly this appeared to be attributable to the child's difficulties in settling, it needed also to be viewed as a dislocation within the symbiotic relationship of mother and child that had an important impact upon mothers' support. Normally when mother and child both settled routinely into the centre, mothers were already negotiating meaningful peer relationships by the time teachers withdrew early intense support. However, when a child did not settle it distracted the mother from her own socially driven purposes for such a prolonged period that before they were able to make any connections with their peers, they had already lost teachers' focused attention, leaving a hiatus of support. As a consequence of not realising the support they had anticipated when they first selected the centre mothers

remained disengaged and frequently stopped attending. Although separation was not an issue in the Playcentre where mothers stayed throughout the session, Stephanie (Playcentre) explained the inevitable pre-occupation of a mother with her child as well as the difficulties associated with their intertwined needs:

> *I'd describe the first year as the baby bubble you know where you're completely at the mercy of the baby' s needs and I guess my needs weren't very magnified at that stage.*

Once the pre-occupation mothers had with their child's initial adjustment was past, they were able to concentrate more fully on using their newfound knowledge of the centre to their own advantage in gaining support.

4.2.4 Maternal variables and support outcomes

Throughout the processes of building relationships, learning the centre culture and settling their child mothers demonstrated very different capacities for adjustment according to their different needs, suggesting unique capacities both for support as well as its generation. Mothers' *personal style* was responsible for such things as: the preferred size of personal networks, the amount and type of support required as well mothers' degree of social competency. All of these things were translated into different motivations for mothers. Lauren (Free Kindergarten) advocated this as a major reason for mothers being given decision making opportunities because of the importance of a good fit:

> *There are lots of things mothers can do in kindergartens. You can go as far as to be really involved and almost make it your part-time job or you can (just) go in and help put some stuff away. I'm willing but I'd rather not offer and then not turn up because of other pressures.*

The amount and type of support mothers needed was determined by their own personal coping response. Some showed a marked degree of self sufficiency through the use of strategies such as planning well ahead. Stephanie (Playcentre) explained:

> *When I got pregnant I just put our mortgage to the bottom and started saving money so that I had some money for that first year of my own, so that was really helpful. (Being home) I've had more time to commit to things. I used to play, but I was manager of our soccer team this year...things I wouldn't have had time to do if I was working, so I guess I've had more community focus really.*

Another way mothers reported they coped with the stresses of motherhood was by having goals and making adaptations that allowed them to retain former activities and familiar support networks. They cited goals of returning to work, and former sports and leisure activities thereby causing minimum disruption in their lives, as well as retention of already valued networks. The different personal variables that shaped mothers' experiences were highly associated with their specific social capacities for gaining and maintaining support. These are discussed more fully later on in chapter four, exemplified by the comments of Wenda (Playgroup) regarding relationship requirements (chapter four, p.123).

4.2.5 Mothers' contribution and centre purposes

Mothers' different support needs were translated into varying motivations to contribute in their centre in order to realise individual outcomes. In this they were reliant upon a good fit response from their particular centre community. Centres responded to mothers' needs variously, according to the purpose of the service the resultant structures and the interpretation of these by staff. These capacities were involuntarily transmitted to mothers as expectations that consequently affected their motivation in seeking support. One of the most important centre-related variables was mothers' *expectations of support*. These were highest in the Playcentre where support was a dual goal along with

the child-focused programme. It had particular emphasis due to the high commitment expected of mothers, both with training as well as managing the centre and was actively inclusive of the whole family to ensure their ongoing support. Ailly (Playcentre) reported support was one of the first things she asked leading staff about because it had been advertised as part of the service. She asked how it was available (chapter five, p.151). By contrast, because mothers in the teacher-led centres believed the services were child-focused, they did not have any expectations of being supported themselves. As in these centres support was defined by teachers as parent education and this was remote from mothers' own definitions, they not only did not recognise teachers' support intent, two mothers even expressed indignation that the centre might have an educational purpose for parents.

Apart from the way teacher-led centres created expectations that support was educationally defined, the way parent support was packaged further impacted on the support environment of these centres. Being compartmentalised into isolated seminars, support was not only separate from the child-focused daily programmes it also operated discretely from the local community. As a consequence support was generated within individual groups of mothers, rather than on a more general basis within the entire community. The lack of a combined focus for support was further reinforced by the way mothers had to be opportunists to gain social advantages because their relationship building was not recognised as the responsibility of staff. This contrasted with the close connectedness experienced by the Playcentre that also included social responsibility for the local community where links were consequently very strong. As a result, mothers in the teacher-led services, rather than associating support with teacher effort, and a commitment of the whole community, were more inclined to attribute support to their own efforts within a localised circle of personal friends.

Mothers were socialised into particular expectations of support through prevalent social messages, one of the most important reinforcements being their designated roles in centres. As these represented the vehicles by which mothers were able to contribute and therefore gain support they were pivotal in centre life. The ultimate was for mothers to

have self-determination to make choices about the type, size and responsibility of their contribution in order to accommodate their personal support needs. In this regard they met a variety of responses from services. Where the centre function relied on mothers' active involvement, as in the Playcentre there was a wide range of roles of varying responsibility from which mothers could make a selection. In contrast where teachers practiced non-collaborative leadership because they perceived responsible roles were the prerogative of teachers, there was a limited range of low powered roles for mothers. Characteristically they were: parent help, tea towel washing, cleaning and dough making. Apart from the status of the roles they did not offer any opportunities for self-direction because they were compulsory and the processes closely controlled by teachers. Whilst there were more flexible and responsible positions for mothers who joined centre committees, these were only available to a minority of mothers and usually those who were more experienced towards the end of their membership. Nina (Community Kindergarten) demonstrated the importance of the committee role to her self-esteem. For this she was willing to forgo her son a place in the free kindergarten when it came up, irrespective of the higher financial cost:

> *I'm one of the fundraisers for them. Rene, her and I are the fundraisers. The boys get to play a lot now whilst we do our own bits and things. We have been there now a bit longer and (on the committee) everybody knows each other.*

Although responsible roles were highly sought after by some mothers, it was evident that rather than the size of the contribution being important, choice was valued even more highly. This was confirmed by a range of diary entries that indicated a spectrum of satisfaction with even seemingly insignificant involvement, from induction as a librarian, to rocking a friend's child to sleep in the pram when the mother had been unable to do it. The feature common to all was being able to self-initiate that produced a good fit with mothers' needs and inevitably increased self-esteem and satisfaction. It was illustrated by one mother whose contribution was a button jar, because she worked and was unable to do more (chapter five, p.184). Dorothy (Free Kindergarten, staff) confirmed mothers' pleasure in their activities stemmed from a range of sources:

Anything that people volunteer to do, I think the mum that takes the washing home feels valued and the end of term clean up. People come and do the cooking with the children.

It has been suggested that before mothers were able to contribute they had to learn how to do this through knowledge about the operation of the centre. The confidence they gained through this process then needed to be put into practice. It was evident that this step was often very difficult for mothers. Although they wanted, even coveted roles, in both the teacher-led as well as the parent-led groups, bridging the hiatus to their goal was often a major event in their lives. In both types of leadership this transition was accomplished by social support. In the Playcentre it was usually through persistent group persuasion and promises of ongoing support. Stephanie (Playcentre) described her initial hesitation over assumption of a committee role:

I got roped into the secretary's role that's how I got there. You know it's a small centre basically everyone has to have some role. I mean it was a bit of a problem at the beginning but now it's routine. (I feel confident) because I know what comes into the centre and how all the things that contribute to it run…The other spin off of doing the minutes is I have had to nut out our computer, so that's been quite a good thing.

In the teacher-led services there was a sense that at least initially, mothers having compulsory structured roles was instrumental in them being able to make a contribution when they felt shy and lacked confidence in centre routines. They operated in much the same way as teachers' "prompts" were able to help mothers take incremental steps to move to the next stage. This was one of the major advantages in the teacher-led services that mothers' benefited from teachers' life experiences and knowledge of the cyclical nature of their needs in gaining the impetus required to move to the next stage. Shirley (Playgroup) demonstrated how this was sometimes achieved as a symbiotic arrangement with centre needs, showing another example of coincidental support in operation:

Nettie (staff) comes around with a list of all types of things that people can do no pressure to do that. I'm one of the librarians, so that's something. I enjoy doing that.

Then again, Shirley told of her personal struggle to take the step of letting her child be cared for by her family on occasions, when so far she had never left her daughter. Transitions in the kindergarten had been responsible for prompting changes. She said:

I hadn't actually left her with anybody which includes the grandparents. It was the transition to afternoon kindy where you actually have to leave them that just opened my eyes. I wasn't going to go. I'd intended to take root here. I think the teacher recognised that was my intention. She just very gently gave me a tap on my elbow and I knew I could let it go from then on. I felt so comforted by that and I just left. I had a bit of a cry but it didn't last long. It was just all go from then on. Of course the grandparents get a look in now. .

Once mothers gained confidence in their chosen roles the enjoyment and reinforcement they gained from them was a continuing source of support. Ailly (Playcentre) demonstrated the importance of the equipment officer's role to her self-esteem. The opportunities it gave her to fulfil needs for creativity, competition and maintaining control were important motivators for finding ways to retain the position when it was threatened by advanced pregnancy:

I have taken on the equipment officer role. A new broom sweeps clean. I want to do things slightly differently, make things better, because I am there for the long term. The stock take is in such a hideous mess. The best way is to revolutionise the system by computerising it…. Now Poppy is back I'm sure if I do hand over the reins she'll grab it. I'm going to tick it off on the chart as my area because people slightly creep in…I might resign as equipment officer, (now I'm pregnant). I'll think about it anyway. But then I feel I've just got my teeth into it

and what's happening is I've got things delegated... my husband is really the
equipment officer. He might continue it.

There was ample evidence that for the majority of mothers in the study, whatever the structure of the centre, their confidence and contribution increased over time. However the converse was also true for a few mothers. In Nettie (Playgroup staff) commented:

There are a lot of people who don't really know how to contribute. They might
be new in the country or have a different set of values simply.

Where mothers were unable to contribute successfully it was inevitably associated with their inability to contract appropriate relationships, whether this was through a lack of social competency, a common language or as a result of personal style. Whenever mothers' activity was compromised in any of these ways, particularly when it was prolonged, a favourable centre response was even more critical. Irrespective of mothers' success in gaining support it did not prevent them from continually seeking it, with their socially driven purpose often transcending services. Wenda (Playgroup) who had moved on to a free kindergarten by the second interview was still hoping for a closer friendship there, than she had been able to find so far. She commented:

I wish it was closer though, the community group, like on Oprah on American
TV. I wish there was more sort of interest, like compassion for each other. The
new people I'm not tight with them or anything. It's early days yet too. I've only
been going a short time relatively.

It was evident that for all mothers the support they needed had a different focus as their child became more independent. The intense demand for parenting knowledge initially drove mothers to concentrate on this level of support for the benefits it held for both themselves and their child within a closely interrelated relationship. However, the growing independence of their child was consequential to mothers' parenting needs becoming gradually less frenetic, allowing them to begin to separate out more personal

requirements. This demonstrated a changed need for mothers towards fulfilling more personal support needs. As support was always dependent upon relationships this was reflected simultaneously in a new emphasis on more individual friendships. Rather than these being based upon parenting needs mothers were increasingly attracted towards the same adult interests and pursuits as their peers. Wenda (Playgroup) commented:

> *It's like a release, thank God. He's out there. It's like you know the first step out of the nest. When they start getting older...you get your freedom. It would be nice (now) to get a bit more friendship coming out of it.*

At this time of awakening to more personal needs kindergarten mothers particularly were alerted to the advantages offered by the childcare arrangements these services provided now their children were well settled. For some mothers this period of adjustment increased their aspirations with regard to greater responsibility in centre committee roles. As well they followed recreational or study pursuits and resumed or established themselves in careers.

4.2.6 Summary

Mothers demonstrated they both needed and gained support through their early childhood centre networks. They achieved this through actively seeking and building useful relationships that they had anticipated when originally selecting a compatible service. Relationships as the catalysts of support were the criteria upon which mothers made a commitment to the centre, establishing this as a crucial period for support. Through these different relationships mothers generated enough knowledge about the operation of the centre to be able to contribute and gain support. However, despite their active role in gaining support, mothers were still reliant upon centres providing favourable environments where they could not only build and maintain relationships but also participate in self-determining roles. Centres responded with wide variability between the parent and teacher-led services. Whilst parent leadership allowed mothers

considerable freedom in self determination, teacher-led services were less collaborative. This established centres' support responses as directly related to the degree to which mothers' contribution was required in order for them to function. Whilst mothers' support needs were originally parenting-focused, with the growing independence of their child personal needs were reasserted. At this time mothers made appropriate provision by generating more individual relationships with peers who had similar personal interests with a view to mutual pursuits beyond the bounds of the centre. The findings associated with research question one culminated in the following theoretical statement:

Proposition 1:
Support is contingent upon the active contribution of the mothers themselves.

4.3   Research question 2:

What according to first time mothers is the nature of effective support?

Table 3

Significant themes relevant to research question 2: What according to first time mothers is the nature of effective support?

Support relationship	Nature of effective support
Social/emotional support	
Staff	Individual attention/help to engage with centre
Staff	Understanding initial loneliness/incapacity
Staff	Help to effect separation from child
Staff	Organising trips/social events/local school transitions
Staff	Provision of opportunities for relationship building
Staff	Provision of opportunities for contribution/decision making
Staff	Mainstream language and cultural support
Peers	Building new personal networks for mother and child
Staff and peers	Welcome/acceptance/orientation/warmth/friendliness
Informational support	
Staff	Knowledge about centre, accessible and updated
Staff	Knowledge about careers/study/early childhood education
Peers	Authentic knowledge through minutiae of everyday exchange
Staff and peers	Role models for behaviour management/expected norms
Staff and peers	Accessible community information
Staff and peers	Access to a range of opinions/able to be selective
Staff and peers	Authentic/incremental/wide range topics/small fragments
Staff and peers	Continuous/contextual/incremental
Staff and peers	Child health/parenting/motherhood/wife/partner/personal
Practical support	
Staff	Introductions to other mothers/buddy system
Staff	Childcare
Staff	Provision of space/opportunities for relationship building
Peers	Trade/buy/sell food/clothes/child items/babysitting
Staff and peers	Transportation to centre/trips/community
Staff and peers	Coffee/tea break/aspirin/crisis management

Table 3 highlights effective support, categorised into the three main areas suggested by the data: social-emotional, informational and practical according to mothers' collective perspective. Effective support is the subject of the next part of chapter four. It begins with the theme introduced in research question one and indicated in Table 3 that support was reliant upon relationships evidenced by mothers' socially driven selection of an early childhood centre that anticipated potential for compatible relationship building. The data showed that determination was required to select a suitable centre that was initiated on the basis of early relationships with teachers. Then, mothers' support base was considerably extended through active building and maintenance of peer relationships. Finally the variety of support available to mothers is discussed as well as how the different centres contributed to its effectiveness. Wenda (Playgroup) identified mothers' major problem at this time was that former relationships no longer provided useful support for their new role asparents:

> *Without (finding new) friends I would have gone stir crazy. I have only got two close friends. I just ditched a whole lot, not because I left that place, but because my whole scene had changed (with those) still in the partying scene, it's just a total mismatch.*

4.3.1   The difficult and lengthy process of centre relationship building

There was evidence that mothers' search for companionship became even more driven after they had visited a centre and began to realise what potential it held for themselves beyond just educational programmes for their child. As a result most investigated several centres before making a choice. There was evidence for this in the way moving on was always related to mothers' own social satisfaction rather than anything child-related. Stephanie (Playcentre) recounted her experience:

> *I did start going to some playgroups, but I found them quite unfriendly. I went several times to several different ones and rarely found what I wanted. (I*

wanted) someone just to say hallo and welcome. You go in there and they ask
you for you name and address and phone number every time and its kind of why
am I giving you this information what are you doing with it? (A friend) sort of
encouraged me to keep going, so I did try another one.

Once mothers had committed to a centre and were looking for individual relationships, compatibility within a same world view was the criterion sought. Stephanie (Playcentre) remarked:

It's really nice to meet some ordinary mums who you are philosophically aligned
with and there's a sort of similarity in childrearing views. I'm just coming into
my own. I'm sure there will be more I receive as I get more confident.

Stephanie described the selection process mothers undertook that allowed them to anticipate a good fit with relationships so that these were likely to provide maximum support. At the same time the Playcentre operated a reciprocal process. The idea was to ensure harmonious relationships in such a small group for optimum centre function. Stephanie explained:

You go three times to see if you like it and they have a selection process to see if
they like you. I was there probably for about an hour and a half for a couple of
times and then after say two sessions she gave me a pamphlet on welcome to the
Playcentre and this is what it is if you are interested.

The length of time and care mothers took over selecting a centre was evidence of the importance they attached to good fit relationships that had greatest potential for support. Being socially satisfied with a centre and beginning to initiate possible relationships was the criterion for engagement, to the degree that if this did not occur, mothers moved on seeking them in yet another centre, even after some months had elapsed. In the study of twelve mothers, nine had trialled more than one centre, with several having already attended up to four. Ailly (Playcentre) remarked regarding one centre she had rejected:

Blimmin' waste of time as far as I was concerned. They were so interested in
what was happening at their husbands' work, which I couldn't care less about.
So I ended up getting quite frustrated.

Stephanie (Playcentre) commented on her experiences of centre selection as well as her
sense of vulnerability, the considerable fortitude required to front up to unknown staff in
different services, and time management associated with exiting the house with a young
child:

I was prepared to take the risk that it was going to be OK, and if I wasn't into it
I could withdraw at a later date. There's a mild element of desperation...as your
child crawls and just wants more. I was at the point of being ready to try
anything. I (first) tried Beavers and they were going through some management
problems and my application got lost...and then I tried Willows and that was
full...(Then) I wandered into one (a centre) up the road several times and people
didn't even speak you know. No-one came up and said, Oh you're new! It takes a
lot to get out of the house with your young one and work around the sleeps and
get to the centre and have a bottle and all that and it's a bit of an effort. I came
home in tears...It was awful.

It was notable that when Stephanie ultimately found personal satisfaction in a centre this
was on an emotional level, rather than as a result of a calculated assessment. She said:

I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I had no idea. I was at that point of
being ready to try anything, (then, the centre I went to) I actually instantly felt
comfortable there. It was funny, I instantly liked it and I hadn't felt that feeling
before.

However, Wenda (Playgroup) illustrated how resilient some mothers had to be in
remaining hopeful of finding friendship when this did not happen immediately. Having
already attended a succession of services since her son was born. She commented:

When Plunket first started a coffee group, I was in the group with four other people...then it sort of went defunct... When I first had him, before I started the playgroups I felt just so isolated. You just feel so isolated.. You really had to fill in your days...you had to have a lot of different friends so you could go around.

4.3.2 Centre selection as a consequence of first relationships with staff

The data showed the first relationships mothers developed in all centres were with staff as a result of initial interactions at enrolment. Mothers were grateful for the way staff both welcomed them and assumed responsibility for settling their children. At the same time, in the teacher-led centres teacher-mother relationships tended to only develop to a particular stage of intimacy. Although mothers showed preferences for relating to specific teachers, it was still a marker of these relationships that conversation rarely went beyond the business of the centre. Tilly (Community Kindergarten) illustrated both of these points:

Ninette (staff) and I talked about heaps of stuff...even everyday stuff. I like all of the teachers really, but I usually talk to Lynette a lot more. I think its just human nature. Different people bond with other people. If you asked each teacher here they would say different people tend to seek out different teachers.

Despite this bonding there appeared to be several reasons why staff-mother relationships remained only professional. In the two Kindergartens and the Playgroup teachers had a higher social status compared with mothers, as a result of deference for their trained knowledge and leading role. It was preserved by teachers as a social control measure and learned by mothers as an expectation of the centre. One of the teachers, Ninette (Community Kindergarten) commented on the lack of power ascribed to mothers. She said:

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*Because mothers are (usually) at home, their role is like little people, little
recognition. I think it is very important for professionals not to overstep certain
boundaries. You can have relationships with parents, but personally I feel that
the relationship operates (only in a detached way) and it can become a little
complicated if you take the relationship outside the centre.*

Whilst teacher-mother relationships were always friendly, attitudes towards status
reduced opportunities for more intimate, disclosure type friendships. As a consequence
of the bounded nature of these relationships, communication was a professional
discourse of directives rather than discussion, and at least formally, within an
educational context. Life experience between mature teachers and young mothers tended
to reinforce these differences. Ninette (Community kindergarten staff) said:

*I get the sense that (the mothers) see us as older. I am older than a lot of mothers
here and more experienced and yes they do value our opinion.*

4.3.3   Relationships with teachers and professional support

As indicated in Table 3, support was categorised as social-emotional, informational and
practical. Informational support was the most prevalent need for mothers and the most
frequently delivered by staff. Close emotional and practical support was more readily
available through the more intimate peer relationships. However, as indicated in the
above table although staff did not necessarily deliver social-emotional support
personally, they were still instrumental in mothers gaining its benefits. This was because
they determined the response made by the centre to relationship building as well as
maternal contribution. In the transference of knowledge mothers' relationships with staff
had particular importance because they exposed mothers to a trained resource as well as
offering access to other dimensions of support. This meant that although teachers'
professional role and maturity presented barriers to intimacy, it was not necessarily a
negative factor as they gave access to a range of support not available in close social

connections. One of the ways this occurred was that teachers' detached relationship allowed them to assume a mediator role that helped mothers withstand peer pressure. Nina (Community kindergarten) recalled an experience of how a teacher's support had been a factor in ameliorating the effects of postnatal depression:

A lot of people ask are you going to have another one and I've always said that I don't want another one and people always question it. (I think) it's better to have one (child) and be happy, than to have another one because people think you should. (The teacher) made me feel better and Mum is always supportive but other people (at the centre) always question this.

Teachers as well as mothers were aware that they performed a mediator function. Ninette (Community kindergarten) remarked:

I had one mother come to me...She was a gardener and she was going to give up her passion because (other mothers) were saying your child is going to school when are you going back to work? (When) I asked her why she was doing this three year course, (it was) because people expected her to do it, so I said: Don't you love gardening for other people? I love it. Well carry on doing it...Later she came back and said thank you.

Teacher intervention was also an important stabiliser in centre relationships because peer pressure made the early childhood environment a competitive one for mothers. One of the conditions of belonging to the community meant conforming to the expected norms of behaviour within the peer group. Ninette (Community Kindergarten staff) described the difficulties mothers had in dealing with these experiences:

You're always comparing your child to another. That goes right on to primary school (and) high school. What reading group is your child in? So you always have to compare with other people. If you bow out a little bit and think well I'm

just not going to do this, that's fine, ... if you've got the confidence, (but) you're always being judged.

Another way mothers looked to staff for support was in terms of managing any peer conflict within the group. Nettie (Playgroup staff) explained:

One of the children was coming up to another child and holding him tightly so that child was very scared and didn't want to come to Kindy any more, so the parents started talking. She can't handle her child and well he's giving problems, you know, chat, chat chat...I talked to the mother supported her and put strategies in place ...I just subtly let the other parents know the gossiping is not appreciated.

Mothers who found relationship building with their peers more difficult relied on teachers providing initial induction period support for much longer. However, this teacher-mother social connection invariably remained detached and was ultimately no substitute for the greater intimacy of same status peer support. Wenda (Playgroup) exemplified this telling of her heavy reliance on the support of one of the teachers and the respect the latter's actions had generated:

Michael actually pushed a little girl straight off the back of the jungle gym. I burst into tears because it shocked the hell out of me. I just couldn't believe he had done it. It was so nasty. Apart from Louise (staff) none of the other people there wanted to know him. You get almost alienated because your son is a nasty person. She's cool, she's really cool. I'd listen to her advice really strongly.

Whilst senior staff also provided similar mediation support in the Playcentre, it operated to a much lesser degree in a context where all mothers were peers.

4.3.4   Contextual support through informal exchange with teachers

Whilst the power differential between teachers and mothers had the effect of maintaining professional distance there were times when it was temporarily relaxed, when teachers spontaneously assumed a mother role themselves. Findings indicated that this was a time of effective support. Dorothy (Free Kindergarten, staff) recognised the productiveness of these closer relationships:

> *Support comes from people in the same sort of relationship. You know you're more likely to open up to people who you identify with in a similar situation.*

The high degree of empathy achieved in these relationships through the more level social status was instrumental in increasing the effectiveness of exchanges between teachers and mothers. Mothers were able to view the teachers outside their formal role because they heard them identify with the same experiences they had themselves, so they believed their difficulties were shared and therefore understood. Subsequently teachers became more respected as role models and their information gained credibility for its authenticity as well as mothers appreciating the great potential of trained support. Wenda (Playgroup) described the importance of staff as a contextual information resource:

> *Mrs. Louise Playgroup staff), she's a very loving person. She's obviously got a very big heart. My son used to run up and give her a big hug. She gave me a book...I think it was "Bringing up Boys?" I think because the personal relationship between us was so close that she just knew (what I needed). Even though she had girls they still went through the violent patch as well.*

Despite teachers' beliefs about needing to maintain professional and therefore detached relationships, the fact that they still gained positive reinforcement from these exchanges ensured they were repeated, even although teachers placed little value on the

conversational information because it was incidental rather than planned. Dorothy (Free Kindergarten staff) commented:

> *If you are a parent you know its no picnic. It's the hardest job in the world. I understand from my own perspective that whole thing of being home with a child with a lack of money and now as a professional, (I enjoy) that feeling of being involved within the community again as somebody. Mothers are always interested in how I work and look after a family as well, time management that sort of thing.*

Effective support was a particular feature of teachers' and mothers' relationships when they served together on management committees. However, this membership was confined to a very small group within the centre community. Nina (Community Kindergarten) described her experience:

> *I've joined their committee now. You see the teachers differently eventually, because when you're there during the day they're with the kids. But (outside) the centre you hear their different views and what they'd like to do and if you don't go to those sorts of meetings you just think they are happy plodding along (as teachers), but you don't realise what a lot of stuff they do outside or what they'd like to do…I'll talk to them about anything now.*

It was significant that Nina still referred to "their" committee, suggesting that despite her increased social status as a committee member it still did not compare with that of the teachers. Nevertheless the closer relationship with teachers had important benefits. Nina reported she had more courage to ask questions, received more contextual authentic information and felt more assertive. As well, committee membership established privileges for her and her child, because as the staff knew them better they took a more personal interest. Nina described the changed relationship:

As soon as I get back to Kindy they let me know how he's been. I think it is because (now) I'm more involved with them they know what is going on at home and they know a lot more about Peter and his personality.

Lauren (Free Kindergarten) who was also a teacher confirmed the view that closer relationships with teachers gained more support for mothers as well as more attention for their child:

From a teacher's point of view you build better relationships with parents if you know them better. You actually work with the child in a different way. If mothers talk to the teachers they understand them more and what the position is and often help you out more too.

4.3.5   Peer relationships and intimate support

Whereas the data showed relationships with teachers provided early childhood access and both professional and informal advice, mothers' relationships with their peers had other potential. Peer social connections were valuable for mothers because of the particular benefits they offered associated with intimate support. An important way this occurred, especially initially was in group relationships. Some mothers were advantaged by already being involved with a group with whom they had joined the centre. These groups were usually a legacy of previous support such as antenatal and Plunket coffee groups that had now provided effective transition to more committed membership in an early childhood centre. However, staff did not necessarily appreciate the value of this peer group support for mothers. Nettie (Playgroup staff) commented:

We have a bit of a club that already knew each other before they came. You notice that they stay together. They invite other mothers as well, but lately I have been thinking how easy actually is it for a new mother to get to know these people?

Staff attitudes were based upon concerns about isolated mothers who did not appear to have any real affiliations. They knew mothers gained much from the companionship of their peers and believed it was too difficult for lone mothers to "break into" what appeared to be very tightly knit groups. Staff concerns were echoed by Wenda (Playgroup) who by the second interview had changed her centre affiliation yet again in her pursuit of a meaningful friendship:

> *I find it very hard actually to form friendships because a lot of people do already have their cliquey groups going and they are not interested.*

However, whilst teachers' anxiety about isolated mothers was not unfounded, it led them to underestimate the purpose that group relationships fulfilled as agents of support for the majority of mothers. Teachers' views were likewise underpinned by a lack of recognition that mothers needed to take an active role in their own support provision. Teachers believed instead that support was a commodity provided by them for mothers as passive recipients. The advantage of the group relationships was they not only provided a pool of low commitment support whilst friendships developed, but were a special resource for mothers who were progressing through the different stages of child development and centre life at the same time. Long-term group affiliations eventually represented pools of potential individual relationships from which mothers selected more permanent personal networks. The above comment by Wenda supported other findings from both mothers' and teachers' interviews that there was a range of success for mothers in relationship building. Evidence presented in question one (4.2.4, p.103) suggested mothers' different personal styles were one of the reasons. Wenda (Playgroup) illustrated this by explaining her own preference for individual rather than multiple relationships:

> *I've come to the conclusion that some people have these lifelong friends and they're always friends...At the moment I've got probably two really close friends...I think there should be genuine friendship or nothing at all...You have to (really) click with people don't you?*

The difficulties Wenda experienced in finding an individual friend suggested this was much more difficult and may require a much wider field of potential candidates than is necessary for individuals who enjoy larger group affiliations.

The interview data showed as well as there being social issues for individual mothers there was also a particular group that was at risk for less effective support through their inability to use the usual channels for building relationships. The group consisted of migrant mothers, who had language and cultural difficulties. Whilst there was evidence of centres taking great pains to be inclusive of these mothers their problems were an ongoing issue. Joan (Free kindergarten, teacher) remarked:

> *It's quite difficult with people from another culture. It isn't always appropriate for them to talk to other people I think just opening the door if you can then just leaving it up to them.*

One of the major problems for migrant mothers was teachers' exclusive focus on showcasing mothers' own culture as a way of welcoming and supporting them, rather than helping them in their goal of successfully adjusting to the new culture and early childhood context in New Zealand. Rosa (Free Kindergarten) explained the everyday issues that concerned her as a new immigrant that she would have liked to discuss:

> *In Sri Lanka they teach a lot in the pre-school. They used to get homework and get stressed out. They were teaching him letters and numbers and it was all a bit too much for him at first. In Sri Lanka we were not even allowed to come into the classes. The way of life here…I am not used to it. Even the weather I'm not used to it. We had forty degrees where I came from. I was feeling cold, things like that, small things (for which I need support).*

Teachers felt inadequate about helping these mothers, particularly because of their busy timeframes. Joan (Free Kindergarten staff) explained:

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It's quite difficult sometimes with people from other cultures. Even although there are three of us, you can't give that individual time... We had a little Korean boy start the other day and mum had the dictionary and dad's English was a bit better...but if I had to do that in a bulk lot (of new entrants), well we couldn't have.

Migrant mothers had other issues that were inhibiting to relationship building. They found it more difficult to approach teachers both because they were shy about different educational practices in their own culture and also because questioning authority was not always acceptable. At the same time language problems made it less likely that they were able to build close relationships with their peers immediately. These mothers had very low expectations of developing intimate relationships compared with other mothers. However, they expressed another purpose initially, that of integrating into the new society by learning the mainstream language and culture. Bonny (Free Kindergarten) explained:

When I came here I meet with the other mothers...so that is nice because (otherwise) I only stay at home and nobody knows about me and here (the) teachers are also nice. I can learn the language here.

Sometimes cultural expectations were another influence in reducing opportunities for building relationships and therefore support, illustrated here by Rita (Playgroup):

It's my family (that is) the problem. I have to ask my husband where I am going and I can't drive. It's so hard...I'm not inviting (people) to my place because it is a very hard difficult environment. I want lots of friends. I would like to go out, just like on your own, like with other mums and you can take your child sometimes.

There was however an important factor that emerged from the study in that increased social interaction was able to ameliorate negative attitudes concerning migrant mothers

so that they were accepted more readily into the group, a first stage in potential relationship development. Stephanie (Playcentre) illustrated how her initial observations of a migrant mother were modified by this type of experience:

> *Some of the mums the more you learn about them, the more you can have a proper relationship. There's a woman from India who has had servants in her life, so when she came to Playcentre and saw Kiwi women walking about with ladders and slides, she wouldn't do it. Then I realised she's never had to do that and she was saying how she got really tired at Playcentre. Whereas my first judgement was she didn't seem to be doing very much, now all the time we talk to people and find out these things.*

4.3.6 The range of potential relationships in early childhood networks

Some mothers found it much more difficult to build relationships due to personal style, which suggested that centres needed to provide more opportunities to accommodate these mothers than was necessary with some others. It was apparent from mothers' interviews and diaries that whilst they all sought the special empathy possible within intimate relationships they were not the only catalysts of meaningful support. It was the range of effective support that was the real advantage of the early childhood networks. The most available of all was peripheral support that placed low demands on commitment as well as providing a wide spectrum of knowledge. Wenda (Playgroup) explained:

> *This lady from across the road, we weren't tight or anything, but I ring her up, and ask can I use your fax machine. I'll pay you, cool. I think it's very handy knowing people in the community. You can discuss things that happen like: Oh, did you hear about that car accident, do you know anything about it?*

The qualities associated with peripheral relationships made them particularly useful for new mothers, as well as those who found close relationships difficult, including minority group mothers and those with a detached personal style. Another advantage was they continued to operate outside the centre in the community. Rosa an immigrant (Free Kindergarten) verified the support she gained from Kindergarten staff and mothers when she passed them on the way to school sometime after leaving the centre:

> *I walk my son to school. There's one lady who is on the road and I meet her quite often. There's another person on this side and I meet most of the parents when I'm walking, taking the same route. If I hadn't put him in Kindy I wouldn't know anybody. Even the teachers were very helpful. They used to enquire about my health and even now when I pass the Kindy they come and talk to me at the fence and that's nice.*

4.3.7 Centre responses to relationship building

The findings associated with research question two established mothers' support was the outcome of the different levels of relationship they built with both staff and parents. In order for the support to be effective, mothers were reliant on their centres to provide environments where they could initiate and conduct relationships as well as make a meaningful contribution to the community. The next part of the chapter documents how these operated as well as showing mothers' opportunism when they were less than satisfactory. Nettie (Playgroup, staff) explained her centre's rationale regarding socialising:

> *We don't really organise anything specific for mothers…it's up to them to make friends themselves, we just provide the opportunity.*

One of the ways social opportunities were provided was through staff establishing a warm welcoming environment where mothers felt comfortable and relaxed. Although

this was a continual emphasis of centres it was most apparent at enrolment. An important aspect of this was teachers' usefulness to mothers because their awareness of the cyclical nature of early childhood centres gave them knowledge about mothers' developmental needs, that also operated in the parent-led centre but to a lesser degree where staff and mothers were peers. As a consequence teachers were effective catalysts of support by providing prompts for mothers' incremental needs. An important role of all staff was making introductions to the rest of the community. Ninette (Community kindergarten: staff) explained:

(On the first day, as we take mothers around) we might introduce someone on the way, otherwise they all (stand) back. They need someone to introduce them.

Wenda (Community Kindergarten) related the helpfulness of staff introductions:

It's the way they introduce you will make the world of difference I think that makes a difference.

Stephanie (Playcentre) described how in the Playcentre introductions were more of a collective experience:

I think inadvertently Playcentre has really met (my needs) without me actually identifying them. I actually vividly remember it was Poppy (Playcentre staff) who smiled at me and said Hello. I vividly remember that on the very first day, probably within five minutes of me arriving and there were a couple of women who came up and said: Are you visiting and how old is your baby and that sort of thing, just really small.

The protocols of meeting as a part of the "atmosphere" and welcome that mothers received were identified by most mothers as significant in providing initial effective support. Shirley (Playgroup) wrote in her diary about how teachers used peer support:

There were lots of new faces today. Nettie asked a few of us to extend ourselves to them. It's great that staff are conscious of parental interaction as well as working with the children.

An important feature of the centre's welcome and need for regular attendance with their child was that mothers encountered each other on a routine basis because at the same time it was also a requirement for establishing friendship. Expectedly all centre structures were favourable in this regard, with the Kindergartens offering most potential for friendship with their larger rolls. However, the Playgroup and Playcentre were most responsive to relationship development because of its contingency upon the provision of space where mothers could talk and discover which new social connections might be most viable. In this regard the Playcentre demonstrated the best arrangements of all, because not only did the mothers meet three times a week, but the centre philosophy of maternal support was reflected in the way the physical environment was arranged, as well as it having adult as well child facilities. Mothers in the Kindergartens found it much more difficult to find space meet in their centres. Rosa (Free Kindergarten) commented:

We hardly meet anybody because in the mornings they come and drop their child off and don't stay. When you come to pick up the child most of them are here at that time so you just meet, not for very long.

The absence of designated adult space in the teacher-led groups sometimes even resulted in mothers' conversation coming into conflict with the centre programme. Nettie (Free Kindergarten, staff) commented:

Mothers meet outside as well but if the weather is a bit wet (and they come inside) at times you have to put a sign up and ask people to talk quietly because we want to do mat times as well you know!

Mothers' reporting both in the interviews and diaries suggested that building relationships, particularly lasting ones was a lengthy process so that they were reliant on the centres for some time before they felt confident to meet other mothers outside in the community. The group relationships mothers formed were useful in this regard because being less intense than single connections mothers were happy to meet outside the centre. Shirley (Playgroup) explained in her diary how mothers strategised to counter the disadvantages of their centres for meeting and planned how they would cope with changes in their children's attendance patterns when they moved up to the next group:

> *A few of us were bemoaning the fact that our contact with one another will discontinue when the children begin afternoon kindy. However we are finding opportunities to get together, for example: birthday party celebrations, walking, visits to the park, playgrounds, gymnasiums and coffee beyond kindy hours.*

Even when relationships were established mothers needed to spend time in maintaining them. A noticeable shift then occurred, where mothers ceased to regard meeting other mothers and having a place to talk as the main support functions of centres, in favour of the childcare it provided that allowed them to follow adult pursuits with their friends.

One of the ways in which centres were able to counter the difficulties presented by low levels of structured meeting was by planned trips and social functions. However, despite this the teacher-led groups, where the most need arose, did not organise these functions on a regular enough basis according to reporting in mothers' interviews and diary entries. It was noticeable that of all the mothers, those who were new immigrants were most appreciative of trips. This was because these outings represented structured arrangements where they were included, before they were well enough integrated into their centre to be part of the natural friendship groups that existed. Centres also provided transport that was another dilemma for these women. Joan (Free Kindergarten, staff reported:

When we do have trips we do obviously need parent support because of our ratio so parents are encouraged to come. Sometimes we do have to limit because of cost. We never have a shortage of parents offering.

Joan's comments indicated that whereas mothers were highly motivated to come on trips for social reasons, this was a very low priority for teachers, who being child-focused, believed mothers' presence was entirely for the purpose of providing extra adult supervision for the children. Likewise, for mothers, social functions at their centres were the most highly recorded events in their diaries indicating they represented the most significant opportunities for support. Mothers in the teacher-led services complained that there was far less importance attached to these occasions than they would have liked. Several mothers like Bonny (Free Kindergarten) indicated they belonged to several early childhood groups simultaneously in order to have enough social contact. Bonny explained:

We also go to Playcentre and I stay. Other mothers stay, so many mothers come there and talk to each other and have a cup of tea, it is a shame there are so few social meetings (at the Kindy) there should be more.

Joan (Free Kindergarten) explained about committee dinners:

At least once a year we do have a committee dinner and quite often the invitation is extended out like for the committee, but other people are asked if they'd like to come but generally only committee comes and that's a social evening. We probably don't organise anything else socially for parents.

Joan indicated that although they were invited, mothers in general did not attend committee social functions, probably because they believed them to be for the purpose of an exclusive group where they did not feel comfortable. Teachers' lack of organisation of more social functions suggested that they were not aware of the importance they held for mothers' support. This was borne out by the incredulity they

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expressed regarding the popularity of social functions when they were held compared with attendance at parent education evenings. Teachers' responses were commensurate with their beliefs that parents' needs were educational and their role was child, not adult focused. Joan (Free Kindergarten) explained the perplexity of staff concerning mothers' preference for social over educational functions:

> *We had a parent education evening and we only got about eight parents, but then we had a fun evening, a pyjama and Milo night. We had a huge attendance so the parents are obviously happy to put themselves out, or to make the effort to come to something where the children are involved. They brought a torch and we had stars in the sandpit, (we had just been to the planetarium) and then had stories. It was a huge success.*

Planned social activities in the Kindergartens and Playgroup were very infrequent compared with the number deemed necessary in the Playcentre when mothers made their own decisions. Whilst the high degree of social activity was related to the intense commitment expected of Playcentre mothers, it still suggested that other services were not as responsive to mothers' social needs in terms of the obvious frequency of interaction required to build the appropriate degree of support. The lack of designated social occasions in the teacher-led centres meant mothers were very resourceful in finding strategies to meet in order to counter the deficit. Sometimes these were very simple. Lily a migrant mother at the Community Kindergarten, routinely arrived extra early to pick up her child:

> *I will miss the (centre when my son goes to school because) when I come a bit early, I have been able to see what's happening and also I talk to the teachers and other parents, that's what I will miss.*

Lily's comments suggested potential meeting times before and after the session were to be capitalised upon in the absence of other planned functions. Whilst like Lily, many mothers showed themselves very opportunistic in finding times and places for meeting

there were obvious difficulties in some centres where the structures were less favourable.

4.3.8 Summary

Effective support for mothers was preceded by gaining access to social relationships for which mothers sought compatible early childhood centres. The processes of selection as well as actually building the relationships were lengthy and often difficult, with mothers showing different degrees of success. Whilst intimacy in relationships was a desirable goal for all mothers, effective support was available for a range of purposes. Of these, group relationships provided same stage networks within a cyclical process and peripheral relationships were particularly advantageous for socially unconnected mothers. The latter was useful in providing a wide spectrum of support that extended beyond the centre into the community. Although the most prevalent support was informational, gained from both staff and peers, mothers also enjoyed emotional as well as practical support, the latter two categories were particularly an aspect within peer relationships. Whilst mothers' same status relationships with their peers had a special quality, those with teachers were equally effective for another reason that of providing dimensions of support outside the scope of peer relationships.

In considering centre responses to mothers' need for a relationship building environment, structure was an important determinant. This meant that the structures of some centres already serendipitously had better provision because of the facilities their environments naturally provided for routine meeting and remaining throughout the session. Apart from this, any further provision centres made was directly dependent upon staff attitudes as well as the degree of importance of mothers' contribution to the functioning of the organisation. As the Playcentre could not operate at all without parent commitment in responsible roles, much attention was paid to their immediate induction into the culture of the centre through intensive social interactions. In contrast, as the teacher-led services were far less dependent upon parents for the centre to function,

because teachers made all the decisions and held the responsible roles, there was much less need to generate opportunities to promote social co-operation. Although teachers knew mothers enjoyed friendships with other parents they met at the centre, because staff attention was child-focused, relationship building was not regarded as the responsibility of the centre. Coupled with this, because teachers did not connect support with being an active process, they did not appreciate that relationship building was a crucial aspect of gaining support. The findings about the nature and generation of effective support culminated in the theoretical statement:

Proposition 2:

Support is conditional upon the development of relationships of trust at different levels within the centre community.

4.4   Research question 3:

Can it be inferred that any support received by mothers from centres is responsive to their changing needs over time?

Table 4

Significant themes relevant to research question 3: Can it be inferred that any support received by mothers from centres is responsive to their changing needs over time?

Support relationship	How responsive to changing needs
Staff	Incremental change from intense to maintenance support
Staff	Recognition of cyclical needs/anticipation/prompting
Staff	Childcare gained importance as mothers move to own pursuits
Peers	Group friendships formed/critical period/for parenting support
Peers	Child independence/individual friendships superseded groups
Staff and peers	Change from solely parenting to parenting/personal focus
Staff and peers	Recognised growth of confidence/gained responsible roles
Staff and peers	Recognised senior/expert mother status

Table 4 gives a strong visual indication that there was a good response to mothers' changing needs through centre networks. As predicted by research question 3 mothers' support needs were complex, being defined by the close interconnection with their child and driven by his or her growth and development. Consequently they were not static, and had implications for mothers as parents but also as women. The last part of chapter four explored the findings concerning how mothers' early childhood membership was characterised by considerable incremental change reflected in the growing independence of their child. Eventually this resulted in mothers being able to separate out their own needs and consider their own futures in terms of adult company, new interests and careers. In accordance with support being an active process mothers were found to make their own provision for the shift by the same-stage group relationships they formed early in membership with other mothers. At the same time this was connected with the cyclical nature of the early childhood centres where they were members. There was

evidence in both staff and mothers' interviews as well as environmental field notes from wall notices that as staff continually experienced a succession of new mothers transitioning with their child to school, they were very familiar with the requirements of both. Knowing about the cyclical nature of centre membership was one of staffs' most important contributions to mothers' support, because this knowledge allowed them to anticipate mothers' developmental requirements as they moved from being novice to expert.

4.4.1   Group relationships as support for changing needs

The diaries were useful in recording highlights of the activities mothers pursued in the same-stage group relationships mothers developed soon after enrolment. They were catalysts of same-stage knowledge where mothers discussed just information relevant to their needs. These group associations were most noticeable at enrolment when mothers' interest was focused on early development and when children were leaving for school. At her second interview Wenda (Playgroup) described her child's growing independence:

> *It's like a release. Thank God he's out there. He's got a little niche. It's like the first step out of the nest. When they get older you get your freedom.*

It was evident from the diaries that once mothers' network connections were in operation they became increasingly important and began to exist in other contexts considerably supported by the fact that mothers shared the same neighbourhood, timeframes and arrangements for picking up their children. Nettie (Playgroup staff) commented on these groups and the active strategies mothers developed to promote socialising:

> *Mothers cope with change by getting together for coffee with the friends that they meet here, getting into a new hobby like mosaic, (quite rife at the moment).*

Some of the mothers started running a babysitting club together with one mother looking after the children. They set that up.

Whilst teachers recognised the group relationships as illustrated by Nettie above and not always with favour (Nettie, p.122) their belief that support was a dispensed commodity meant they did not connect it with continuing relationships. However, Joan (Free Kindergarten) illustrated how effective support could be when teachers connected with mothers' systems as when her centre organised transition to school sessions:

Two or three mums (for whom it is relevant) get information about it. I do a shared lunch. I invite the principals and the deputy principals of the three schools in the area to come and have a shared lunch first and then they sit in a circle and answer questions and we have been invited back to come on a walking trip with the school.

Nettie's use of the "small group at the same stage" principle whilst not a conscious effort to key into mothers' systems (something that was evident by the way she organised it without consultation) was very successful. Not only was it contextual and focused on the needs of particular mothers at that point in time, but it represented a social learning environment with possibilities for discussion.

An important feature of the group relationships was that the more enduring friendships that developed from these provided effective support beyond the centre premises as enduring components in personal networks. Manon (Playcentre staff) believed that membership had continuity beyond the sessions and would support members through the family lifecycle. She said:

At Playcentre mothers gain a sense of growth, we've provided a wonderful beginning for their children, wonderful friendships that carry on and our children's future when they become parents as well.

The capacity for Playcentre to promote these continuing relationships was also remarked upon by Ninette (Community Kindergarten staff) who commented:

Thinking back from when I had children and joined Playcentre. I've still got friends now who I was at antenatal class with and our children are turning eighteen and we've been through early childhood centres together...Those friendships definitely start (in the) early childhood years.

4.4.2   Increased confidence and greater responsibility

A major indicator of mothers' growing confidence and independence from their children's demands was the assumption of more responsible roles. Incidents of this were entered into diaries and mothers spoke of their achievements in the second set of interviews. One formal aspect of progression in centres was committee membership. However an informal way was through mothers' increasing social status as they became more experienced and were no longer the newest members of the centre community. Mothers' status was reinforced by the admiration and respect accorded them for their accumulated knowledge and increased competence in parenting. Gaining status with their peers was also reflected in the whole community because mothers also experienced greater acceptance from teachers and consequently more equal relationships. In the teacher-led centres the highest form of this acceptance was demonstrated by invitations to join the teachers in recreational activities outside the centre. Nina (Community Kindergarten) who in the first interview had referred to "their committee" now talked about *"our"* last committee meeting. She described her experience:

Being on the committee I've got a better understanding of down there and you see the teachers differently because ...you hear these different views and actually some of them go out for dinner and to the movies and they invited me.

The developmental process that established mothers as experienced members of the group and often saw them as committee members meant that teachers came to know the mothers better. Consequently mothers' individual areas of qualified expertise gained greater acceptance by teachers, leading to their greater use for the benefit of the centre, as well as increasing the contribution and status of the individual, more experienced mothers in the centre. An important aspect of mothers' continual growth and development in all centres was that they became more conversant with the field of education in general. Stephanie (Playcentre) explained:

> *Playcentre mothers know 100% what is going on with their child and early childhood education. An unanticipated thing was my role as an educator, an early childhood educator and I am a very big part of that doing.*

Whilst this educational knowledge was initially associated with the early childhood sector, it also opened up some more general understandings of further education and particularly the transition to school.

In the Playcentre an important impetus for mothers gaining new knowledge and moving to different stages was commitment to formal Playcentre training. For some it was a serendipitous finding, for others it was a planned career move. For some mothers, the sense of competence it provided, stimulated their progression through the different courses. Ailly explained:

> *Someone said, Oh, Ailly's finished course one, so I felt now I do count for something. It was really quite cool. So I told my husband… Oh how naïve you are, … in the first years…How little you knew then, (although) you (still) don't know what you could know. There is such an unlocked potential, until you go through Playcentre training you'd never realise it never, never…You wouldn't have the confidence actually to carry things through without the centre impetus. (Eventually) you have that sort of background motivation to do things your way.*

4.4.3   Summary

There was evidence that mothers' support needs were incremental due to the close relationship with their child and the ever changing demands made by his or her development. These changes involved mothers as parents as well as women and described a gradual shift from being wholly occupied with their child to having increased interest in their own personal future. In accordance with support being an active process mothers developed strategies to make incremental provision for themselves, particularly through the same stage group relationships. However they gained a good response from centres where the cyclical nature of early childhood centres was recognised. One of the most important aspects of gaining incremental support was the way staff were able to provide prompts for mothers to gain support as they progressed to the next stage. It was particularly marked in the teacher-led centres where teachers were older and able to anticipate mothers' needs both as mothers and women. Particularly effective was the way they keyed into mothers' own systems during the period of transition to school (even although this was involuntary) showing the desirability of a good fit relationship between teachers and mothers. The proposition that culminated from the findings regarding whether mothers gained incremental support is as follows:

Proposition 3:
Effective early childhood communities are responsive to the changing needs of mothers.

4.5   Chapter summary

Chapter four dealt with the maternal results as the primary source of data. The major finding was that mothers' determined their own support through an active response. First they selected a compatible early childhood centre where they could build and maintain relationships as well as contribute to the community. Centres had a reciprocal

role in providing optimum conditions for this to occur and the result was a range of incremental support for mothers. Centres' responses were largely consistent with staff interpretation of the natural structures occurring in their type of service, as well as the degree to which they required mothers to assume a role, in order for the centre to function. In addition, mothers gained support through relationships with their peers. Chapter five goes on to consider the way in which centres responded to mothers' needs through the secondary source of data, staff results.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS
PRESENTED AS A SET OF PROPOSITIONS (4-6)

5.1   Introduction to results chapter five: research questions 4-6

The following chapter addresses the staff findings in relation to the last three of the original six research questions. These are summarised and culminate in theoretical propositions that were developed on the basis of the data presented for each question. Whereas chapter four focused on the active role mothers played in their own support, chapter five focuses on the response to this by the early childhood communities where mothers were involved. In this chapter, as in chapter four, data have been generated in the form of interview, diary and environmental field note records. As staff had very different perspectives according to whether they operated within teacher-led or parent-led services, the terms "staff" and "teachers" are not interchangeable. Whereas "staff" denotes both teachers and leading mothers in the Playcentre, "teachers" refers only to teaching personnel in the teacher-led centres. This has important implications because teacher-led centres comprised two different social groups, mothers and teachers, where there was a power differential, as well as frequently differing perspectives. In comparison the parent-led centre was not only established upon collaborative principles, but mothers all shared the supervisory roles. Chapter five begins with a discussion relating to the findings associated with staff attitudes to providing support for mothers.

5.2 Research question 4: To what extent do the staff believe they have a role in supporting mothers who attend early childhood centres?

Table 5

Significant themes relevant to research question 4: To what extent do the staff believe they have a role in supporting mothers who attend early childhood centres?

The perceived support roles of teachers

Facilitators of partnerships for the support of families
Educators of parents
Advisors concerning early childhood education and child development
Role distributors in centres
Decision makers for the centre communities
Facilitators of atmosphere/environment
Entrepreneurs in providing social functions/trips
Role models
Educators and caregivers of centre children
Providers of centre and local community information

The perceived support roles of Playcentre staff

Supporters of each other for the benefit of families
Supporters of each other for the centre to function
Facilitators/supervisors of sessions
Role negotiators
Contributors to all centre decision making
Contributors to centre atmosphere/environment
Supporters of the local community known to the centre
Joint facilitators of centre environment
Joint facilitators of social functions/trips
Role models
Contributors to centre knowledge through Playcentre training

Table 5 indicates the support roles staff perceived they had with mothers. The evidence presented for research question three will show staff did believe they had a role in supporting mothers, prompted by legislated requirements. However, for teachers in the teacher-led centres it was very secondary to their child involvement as well as being directed towards child-focused rather than personal benefits for mothers. In comparison the Playcentre had a dual purpose programme for the simultaneous support of child and mothers. Ailly commented about the availability of the support she anticipated in

chapter five, p. 150. Teachers displayed enthusiasm about the principles of building partnerships with mothers. Joan (Free Kindergarten staff) remarked:

> *Early childhood is such a great partnership between the family the centre and the child. We can't successfully have a positive pre-school experience for the child unless the parent is really, really involved.*

However, despite a positive view of partnerships teachers found it difficult to implement them particularly because of the inferred equity, a response influenced by attitudes to their professional role as well as their traditional views about adult education. Dorothy (Free Kindergarten staff) alluded to her lack of confidence and reluctance to move outside child facilitation:

> *I think that we can offer parents support and encouragement but we need to recognise that our area of expertise is as early childhood teachers. If peoples' needs require something else it's our role to actually advise them where to go to.*

Unlike Playcentre staff who gave equal weight to supporting both children and mothers within one programme, teachers' child-focus meant their planned parent support was a very secondary focus as well as an extra call on their time. These attitudes had led teachers to believing their obligations to parents were best served through separate programmes from those of the children. Joan (Free Kindergarten) explained:

> *The child's education has got to be in my mind the number one priority. Educating the parent is part of it but our energies because we have 45 children a session and only three teachers, our main energies do go into the child.*

The above statement from Joan's interview whilst emphasising teachers' child-focused motivation in teacher-led centres, also included their definition of parent support as parent education.

5.2.1 Teachers' beliefs regarding partnership obligations

The next part of chapter five goes on to explain the measures taken by teachers in the teacher-led centres to fulfil parent support obligations that they viewed as separate aspects of their programmes. These were: a welcoming atmosphere, child portfolios, rostered duties and parent education. Joan (Free Kindergarten) explained the atmosphere of welcome:

> *I think the staff are very "user friendly" and that was indicated in our ERO report. What a wonderful thing to say! I think the actual environment is as well. We try to make it as welcoming as we can. We've got a "Haere mai" welcome and we've got some greetings up there. I think physically we're quite lucky because it is a light airy building. With children's pictures and photos I think that's always sort of good and inviting.*

Whenever staff discussed their obligations to parents they invariably referred to the atmosphere they created. They believed this was a very important part of linking with families and made for a pleasant working climate so that it fulfilled several purposes. The mothers appreciated this and it was frequently remarked upon as by Shirley (Playgroup):

> *The teachers are very welcoming and always at the door to greet you...depending on how busy they are...It's very warming, very welcoming to everybody.*

There were suggestions that staff in all centres were very successful in these interactions with mothers because they keyed into parents' need to feel comfortable in the centre because as Wenda indicated it could be a "scary" place to come to on your own (chapter 5, p.155).

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The Playcentre staff likewise had established a warm welcoming atmosphere in their sessions that was reinforced by provision of adult seating and temporary suspension of the session activities if a new mother arrived or needed the attention of the group, illustrating the integrated dual child-mother focus. Stephanie (Playcentre) explained how the focus of the entire centre had been upon her comfort on her enrolment morning:

> *I was met by my buddy, Kim and she sort of showed me around and I liked it straight away. I vividly remember it was Poppy (leading mother) who smiled at me and said 'Hallo." On the very first day, probably within five minutes of me arriving there were a couple of women who did the same and came up and said "Are you visiting" How old is your baby?" It was that sort of thing, just really small, but important.*

Whilst teachers in the Kindergartens and Playgroup were very skilled in facilitating mothers on arrival through their familiarity with centre routines, they expressed much less confidence in conceptualising ideas regarding what was required by the early childhood legislation in building partnerships. Joan (Free Kindergarten, staff) exemplified teachers' lack of confidence in discussing issues with parents:

> *It is a problem to know what parents want, because often what we think they want is not the case. I did have a parent come to me and talk about parenting concerns and I suggested that a really good idea would be for her to do a community parenting course, so I gave her the information.*

Joan likewise believed partnerships were something that occurred at a symbolic level across the profession rather than having practical implications for her centre. She said:

> *Early childhood is such a great partnership between the family the centre and the child and we can't have a positive preschool experience for the child unless the parent is involved.*

Whilst Joan understood that parents needed to contribute and there were ways teachers tried to develop this concept in the centre it was always done by teachers to parents rather than with them, without the collaboration inherent in the concept of "partnership" that includes discussion and shared decision making. The chosen means of working with parents in partnerships was the portfolios. Joan explained:

Getting our parents involved more and contributing to the child's portfolio. That's kind of one of our main goals really. We are encouraging parents to do the parent voice for our learning stories so we actually say take a form home and tell us your child's story. In the newsletter we have put a big explanation and actually try and include parents that way.

Joan's explanation exemplified how teachers viewed partnerships as having mothers working under direction from teachers on designated projects, often in a detached way through lengthy written instruction. It was not conceived as requiring joint discussion and shared decision making. The portfolios (or children's folders) were frequently referred to by Joan as the vehicle of partnership, but rather than them being discussed with mothers they were sent home with written instructions. She gave an example of their use at a family fun evening:

These sorts of evenings are much better if you can put a bit of parent education in or you can base some information on. We had all the folders going so we said "Go and have a look at your folders with your children!" So we incorporated that in (the family evening).

Partnership models in the centres whilst providing mothers with ways to contribute did this within a very controlled environment. Teachers gave mothers designated roles that usually meant rostered duties of parent help, washing tea towels, cleaning and making dough. Joan (Free Kindergarten, staff) explained these contributions as an aspect of partnership:

Mothers are very valued obviously. I think they have quite a few roles. We regard them as imperative in just being a partner in their children's education so they're encouraged to come in and do parent help.

Ninette (Free Kindergarten, staff) described the contribution mothers made in the Kindergarten:

People come and do the cooking with the children and they share their area of expertise. Joan probably showed you the box…What is your area of expertise? Would you like to contribute? And they just do little jobs, like chopping up the fruit for afternoon tea, preparing collage materials, all sorts of things. I am sure people feel valued if they do that.

Ninette's commentary further emphasised mothers' contribution was carefully controlled and 'mothers' expertise" was limited to low level skills. At the same time signalling their interest to become involved was through teachers' systems of written communication rather than discussion. In all three centres teachers tended to do things for mothers rather than with them. Nettie (Playgroup, staff) said:

I just inform them, have you heard we are doing a working bee and doing this and that. You just tell them what you are doing.

In the same way parents were seen as contributors to benefits for the centre rather than gaining anything personally through this process, in keeping with teachers' beliefs that support was a commodity. Nettie (Playgroup, staff) explained:

Parents offer help…If we need something done, like painting for example…I know who the painters are and ask them. The carpet for example, one parent brought me in some test pots to choose a colour for the outside of the building. One parent fixed all the lights. We are always looking for somebody who has expertise in the area.

The issues teachers had regarding partnerships were associated with the power differential that they reinforced between themselves and mothers as a means of social control. Although they wanted to work with parents, they tried to do this in such a way that they preserved their power base because they found facilitation difficult. Playcentre staff did not have these same issues because they shared the same perspectives as all the other mothers in their group and decision making was established upon a co-operative basis where mothers all shared the leadership role. Ailly (Playcentre) explained how all members had the same status as leading mothers.

> *What I liked was the evaluation at the end of the session we all get together and we talk about how the session went. You are in a circle for a couple of minutes and the notices are shared like the meeting will be at so and so's place and there's a shared morning tea.*

The lack of shared discussion in the teacher-led centres between teachers and mothers led to teachers' view that parents were unresponsive because they were uninterested. Nettie (Playgroup, staff) interpreted parents' view:

> *I think parents genuinely think that if my opinion is not asked then you don't need it, its not needed and if I say anything wrong it's better not to say anything.*

Mothers' interviews suggested that rather than a lack of interest they were hesitant to offer their opinion because they were unfamiliar with teachers consulting them for their ideas. Although teachers were largely responsible for the lack of exchange they still found parents' hesitancy to be involved difficult to deal with and as a result it was easier not to include parents. This further reinforced their resolve to make all the decisions themselves. There was no evidence from any source that teachers spent time discussing the concept of partnership in staff meetings or that they had ever shared the idea with parents. Even parent education sessions, were not discussed between staff, these sessions being the prerogative of head teachers. Nettie (Playgroup, staff) explained:

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We do some parent education. We ask parents to tell us what their needs are and they don't. The parent education programme I've developed that all by myself.

The lack of consultation was confirmed by Louise (Playgroup, staff) who said:

They have them once a term, Nettie and the committee decide. I haven't actually been involved in that. I haven't been to one.

The idea that support was narrowly and discretely defined as educational in the teacher-led centres contrasted with mothers' perceptions of support as expressed by Manon (Playcentre staff) in the parent-led group:

Supporting mums is a really big part of our Playcentre. New mums that are coming in...need a lot of support just to settle in and feel comfortable ...We do as much of that as we can. Mums with new babies are really important.

Manon's comment established that not only did Playcentre mothers perceive support as having a much wider, less defined capacity than the narrow educational one preferred by teachers, but support was also an integral part of life in the centre, rather than constituting a separate programme. As well, there was great emphasis on emotional support, only possible within close relationships where there was empathy for mothers to feel comfortable and accepted. As expectations were found to be significant deciders of actions in all centres in the study an important aspect of support provision in the Playcentre was that it was expected. As support was widely advertised as a benefit of membership, this goal along with mothers' expectations was continually reinforced. The quotation from Ailly (Playcentre) illustrated not only an expectation of gaining support, but an example of its practical application, as she learned the culture of the centre:

I said what is this support thing I hear about? So I was told one of the ladies has had a baby...and her husband had never been on his own with the two children,

so they all rallied around and bought him dinners every night. I was telling my
husband and he thought, wow they sound like a really nice bunch of people.

Ailly's information reflected the culture that had been established within the Playcentre and the way that it was transmitted to each member and modelled in order to ensure its continuation. The emphasis on support, apart from its usefulness for mothers and families was prompted by the degree of commitment Playcentre members had to make in leadership roles as well as training. The same degree of participation was not expected in the teacher-led services. In contrast, isolated parent education sessions occurred so infrequently (once or twice annually in all three groups) they were a surprise for parents, who because they were not involved in their planning did not even always know they applied to them. Likewise field notes suggested there was no reference to education, support or partnerships in the induction information of the centres. Nina (Community Kindergarten) indicated a lack of consultation with parents:

Maybe they discuss it at committee meetings or something. They may discuss it
there. I don't know but they're not discussed. When they have their staff
meetings maybe they've decided this is where our focus is.

Although teachers indicated beliefs about support that had a very narrow educational focus, this did not mean they were never involved in other support transactions with mothers. Mothers indicated frequent incidental help and support from teachers (Refer, Nina, Community Kindergarten, chapter five, p.177). The issue was that whilst teachers recognised they helped mothers in this way they placed no value upon unplanned exchanges in lay conversation. Examples of this were quoted in chapter four where Ninette described how she supported a mother with decision making about a career (p.118). Likewise Dorothy described how she regularly helped mothers by telling them of her own experiences as a parent (chapter five, p.168). These exchanges were particularly valuable for mothers because the equality they evoked generated more equal relationships with consequent increased emotional support. Joan (Free Kindergarten) explained:

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I'm only too happy to share experiences...because I've got older children, quite often there are issues I have been through myself. I think it's really important to be able to let them realise that they are not alone...I would suggest and give phone numbers.

The same gravitation to staff occurred in the Playcentre to the degree that the most senior leading mother was "rationed" in order for her to be supported in her responsible role. Otherwise she was not only continuously approached at the centre, but mothers also constantly phoned her at home. Stephanie reported:

Manon is very knowledgeable, people always want to talk to her about problems we have to rest her otherwise it is all too much, so we told her to take time off.

There were indications that exchanges with staff were highly valued by mothers because they led mothers on to another stage. As well, in the teacher-led centres they gave mothers insight into teachers' own personal experiences as mothers. This reduced teachers' status making them more like the mothers themselves, so that their advice was authentic and therefore more believable. Ninette (Free Kindergarten, staff) described the need for equity in order to promote disclosure type relationships:

Support comes from people in the same sort of situation. You are more inclined to open up to people who you identify with in a similar situation.

As a consequence of this type of exchange the information shared was authentic and therefore more likely to be added to personal repertoires. Tilly (Community Kindergarten) commented:

If you hear what someone's done, it's been done. (You know) it's worked, rather than just reading a thing and saying yes it's been done and you can see that their

child's different because of it. I still prefer to hear it from a mothers' point of view (rather than read it).

At the same time Wenda (Playgroup) indicated credibility extended to teachers as well as peers:

If you knew a teacher has had the same problem as you, you would certainly go to them but unless you suspect that they've got the same issues as you, you wouldn't ask them, because you only pick the brains that you know they really know things about.

Wenda's comments indicated the need for authentic as well as educational information that she believed was the right combination of support from teachers, again identifying the different views on support that existed between teachers and mothers in teacher-led centres. Whilst mothers placed great store by these incidental, learning opportunities, teachers tended to dismiss them as lay conversation that was not only untrained, but also too insignificant to have any educational value. Dorothy (Free Kindergarten, staff) explained her anxieties about untrained information being integrated into programmes:

Some parents come up with ideas and say you could have a so and so and how about this. It is dangerous though because they may be well off the mark.

Dorothy's commentary suggested that the difficulty teachers had with untrained information had consequences for including parents in decision making in their centres. As well as this it led teachers to doubt the usefulness of peer support between mothers because they were exchanging uninformed knowledge. When teachers were asked their views on peer support and whether mothers helped each other, there were mixed responses. Dorothy (Free Kindergarten) answered:

I don't really know actually. I think they might, I don't know. That's really a bit difficult to know if someone is role modelling off another parent. You're often

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conscious if someone is watching what you are doing as a teacher, but not another parent.

Joan (Free Kindergarten) was more definite in believing mothers learned from teachers rather than their peers:

They have access to any written information that we've got. But I guess the modelling from teachers is probably the best thing they can learn. I guess the modelling from teachers is probably the best thing. They perhaps would look more to us than to other parents. No, they would not learn so much from other mothers.

Joan showed how she recognised mothers learned from teachers and whilst she believed it was more important than from mothers there were uncertainties as to its worth and how it occurred. The same hesitancy was frequently expressed as a reason for having reservations about working with mothers. It was attributed to a lack of training where teachers had no theoretical understanding of adult educational needs. Joan (Free Kindergarten, teacher) commented:

I think we do have an obligation to parents, because of who we are, but there has to be a limit because we are not social workers and it is not what we are trained for.

The view expressed by Joan inferred not only that teachers are untrained to facilitate parents but the lack of training casts doubt upon whether it is really part of a teacher's role. Dorothy (Free Kindergarten staff) who agreed with Joan's interpretation explained how her understanding of working with parents had only been based on practical experience, with particular insights through being a mother herself:

You learn on the job really. In terms of working with parents I think it's just intuitively knowing what parents might be going through as opposed to having been taught what parents might be going through.

Lauren (Free Kindergarten mother who was also a teacher) expressed similar sentiments but also that working with parents was complex and difficult and a recurrent source of stress for teachers:

I always look back at what I learned at College and you know there was very little about how to work with parents...You get taught to resolve conflict between children but what about conflict between adults? You don't actually get taught and you get a parent coming in swearing at you because their child has been bitten, or an aggressive male who demands to know what happened when they fell off something. That is really scary. I know the amount of times that I've just been shaking.

The same issues regarding a perceived hiatus between trained and untrained knowledge did not arise in the Playcentre. Mothers were all part of the Playcentre training programme albeit at different levels and new knowledge, as much as more widely focused everyday exchange was continually part of the integrated programme. They discussed what they had learned a particular feature of which was the ability to put it into practice during the session. When this occurred mothers were able to operate autonomously, as they had full responsibility for the session and all its activities on that day. Ailly (Playcentre) described how she implemented her growing repertoire of knowledge with regard to behaviour management, by verbalising what she had learned as she explained:

The communication course really taught me some things, respectful relationships...You've got this process to go through, describe...express consequences...OK. You describe the situation with the floors covered with toys,

then like express, it can be dangerous. Well what are we going to do about it? Consequences if we don't clean it up...

5.2.2 Summary:

Staff in both teacher-led and parent-led centres believed they had roles in supporting mothers. However, teachers saw this as very secondary to their child-focused goal and for the child-related purpose of gaining parenting skills rather than for mothers' personal benefit. Coupled with this teachers' perception of the gap between their own trained knowledge and that of parents led them to believe parent education constituted the most effective support. These attitudes led to teachers compartmentalising support as educational packages rather than viewing it as an integral part of the centre programme. In contrast the Playcentre leadership operated a parallel support focus for mothers along with the children's programme that included both parenting and personal support. Mothers' Playcentre training was an important aspect of this with new knowledge being a topic of conversation between mothers in the sessions, as well as being autonomously implemented in applied practice. It was significant that mothers were more readily motivated to seek support in the parent-led service because they were given expectations that it was a feature of the service.

Teachers' view of their support role for mothers was defined by legislated requirements to establish partnerships with parents. Whilst they were enthusiastic about these ideas they found it very difficult to implement them in practice. A major barrier was the inferred equality of partnership that teachers found hard to reconcile with their reservations about untrained knowledge. Consequently they placed strict controls upon mothers' contribution that had implications for their support because of the limitations it had for self-determination. Whilst teachers were friendly with mothers and serious about their obligations to them, they had difficulties with understanding and implementing partnerships. At the same time because their definition of support was passive rather than active they were unaware that their actions were actually inhibiting. Teacher

attitudes were at least in part attributable to a lack of training in the facilitation of adults. Although teachers were effective in their informal interactions with mothers their traditional beliefs about adult education and support meant they did not place value upon unplanned informal exchange. The parent-led service that operated on a socially co-operative basis was not concerned with the same issues as those in the teacher-led centres. Although the mothers did not always agree amongst themselves they followed democratic processes that eventually reached a consensus and allowed a high degree of self-determination. Mothers readily integrated new knowledge from their Playcentre training into the daily exchange of the session. The data presented in support of the roles staff perceived with mothers culminated in the following theoretical statement:

Proposition 4:
Staff beliefs about their role as well as the centre structure are major determinants of the degree to which formal support is promoted.

5.3   Research question 5:

What are staff perceptions of the nature of effective support for mothers?

Table 6

Significant themes relevant to research question 5: What are staff perceptions of the nature of effective support for mothers?

Teachers' perceptions of effective support

Parent education that is formal/planned/non-integrated/comprehensive
Isolated packages of written information/newsletters/whiteboards/notices
Professional advice regarding child development/education
Written information displaying community services/notices
Planned transition to centre and school

Playcentre staff perceptions of effective support

Playcentre courses that are social/allow choice/integrated/practical
Verbal exchange of new ideas from training courses/practical application
Opportunities for self determination in collaborative decision making
Opportunities for contributing in a range of roles
Planned arrangements for building relationships/parent space/time/opportunities
High level of social activity/regular/incidental social functions
High level of verbal communication/exchange of everyday minutiae of life
Personal/practical help for everyday living
Transcends centre into community/practical help for neighbours
Planned transition to centre and school

Table 6 documents the different perceptions of support that existed between teachers in the teacher-led services and staff in the Playcentre. Teachers' perceptions were established upon the basis of teachers' definition of support being a passive process dispensed by them to mothers as well as professional attitudes to their role and trained knowledge. In contrast Playcentre staff responded as mothers, demonstrating an active support role and the self-determination necessary for effective contribution. Chapter five continues with evidence relevant to research question five that discusses the different models of support and how they operated in the teacher-led and parent-led services.

Whilst teachers were friendly and helpful to parents they did not regard these actions as constituting effective support, something they believed was only achieved through formally planned information, the most important being isolated packages of parent education. Underpinning teachers' perspective according to their passive view of support was a didactic "top down" delivery. Nettie (Playgroup, staff) commented:

We do some parent education...to support parents.

It was evident that despite the social learning principles teachers understood with children, they had a traditional view of adult education. Teachers' attitudes that were important deciders of outcomes also reflected professional beliefs that trained knowledge was more valuable in the centres than lay information. Teachers' inability to acknowledge a place for parents' untrained contribution resulted in a power differential between teachers and parents that was responsible for a tension that precluded true partnerships. A non-collaborative leadership style maintained teachers' views as paramount because a lack of real communication did not expose them to mothers' perspectives. As a consequence parents' ideas were rarely influential in shaping what happened in their early childhood communities.

In the parent-led group because mothers were also staff they could operate according to their own perspective of support. They likewise valued trained knowledge and had the advantage of being able to access this through the Playcentre courses as well as implement new information within everyday programmes that was an effective aspect of their learning. An important aspect of motivation was the sense of enhancing their own child's environment as well as advancing their own learning. Ailly (Playcentre) explained how she had set up activities after a science course:

My son was so into his science, into making circuits all about power. I went on a science workshop that was just so fascinating and so truly amazing that I can help him immediately here. I got out some redundant equipment I had never seen

used. I put it all out and I was experimenting with it because I feel so comfortable having learned about it at the workshop.

Whilst Playcentre staff recognised the value of trained knowledge because they responded as mothers rather than confining themselves to the exclusive educational knowledge base of teachers, they sought a wider spectrum of knowledge. At the same time they had expectations of personal support that were satisfied through the everyday exchange of the minutiae of life within the community.

5.3.1 Teachers' beliefs about written communication as effective support

Interview data as well as environmental field notes showed teachers in teacher-led centres gave parents isolated packages of information rather than integrating it within the everyday programme. These were delivered at enrolment, during parent education sessions and as regular newsletters. In addition, teachers placed laminated explanations at activity sites in the centre. Deliveries of information were predominantly written, directive and over comprehensive. Kit (Community Kindergarten, staff) illustrated teachers' extreme reliance on written explanation:

We have a lot of information. Once I've got a parent off the waiting list, I then send them information through the mail, before they're going to come. I (then) send them a letter of confirmation that your child is booked in, your starting date will be such and such. I send them information about the pre-school, a booklet that contains more or less everything about the pre-school the hours how much its going to cost, how many staff we have (and) what we do. I send them a copy of the programme and the routines which is on a sheet as well so they know precisely what time the children arrive...When mums arrive on the first day we actually send information. We send a little certificate to the child welcoming them, saying that it's going to be a special day.

Kit further commented on the arrangements with newsletters:

> *We have at least one newsletter a term. This term we will have two. I would say*
> *that the vast majority of parents do not read them, from the things that have*
> *come up (where they say they have no knowledge of something) and I say, it was*
> *in your newsletter.*

As teachers indicated they met very regularly to exchange views on centre business there was a considerable discrepancy between this in-depth discussion and the final communication to parents in newsletters. It meant that mothers rather than being partners in discussions were receivers of aspects of information that teachers wanted to impart, after any decisions had already been made. At the same time regular communication was further constrained by photocopying costs. Joan (Free Kindergarten, staff) explained the system:

> *We have a monthly newsletter but then our main way of communicating is our*
> *whiteboard that is written on every day and we make it different everyday so*
> *parents will read it. When they enrol we really encourage them to read it*
> *because the newsletter actually costs quite a lot of money so we really only want*
> *to put one out once a month.*

Joan's view was that the cost of newsletters was responsible for keeping them to a minimum. This was somewhat resolved by implementation of a whiteboard where teachers wrote notices. However, this reduced the information even further to a few sentences. What had further implications was Joan had explained this was a new venture to improve communication by capturing mothers' comments on a more regular basis. However, field notes indicated it was only teachers who wrote on the board. Mothers who were interviewed said they were not confident about writing anything themselves in such a public arena.

As the main transmission of information was confined to written material (often an overload at the time because of the hiatus between newsletters) there were difficulties with reading and processing so that as Kit indicated parents very often responded by ignoring it (chapter five, p.165). The lack of shared information that was a consequence of this was a source of frustration to some teachers. Kit (Community Kindergarten, staff) explained how she attempted to solve the problem:

> *We've got community workers this week and I've got two signs with all the times down. I've got one on the door facing the door and I've got one on the noticeboard, and it says there everybody is welcome, but the number of parents who have come up to me and said, what time are they going to be here, oh can my child come? I've had them up since the beginning of last week.*

Kit's attempts to engage mothers' attention were continually unsuccessful because she failed to recognise the fundamental difficulty resided with teachers' method of transmission rather than mothers' lack of attention. However, because mothers found it unsatisfactory they initiated conversations with the teachers for information that was a positive outcome for their support because it meant that teachers then had to spend extra time talking to them individually. It was yet another marker of how mothers were opportunists in accessing support within systems that were not always conducive to active participation of adults apart from teachers.

In contrast the parent-led service was much less reliant upon written information. Being mothers, staff preferred verbal exchange and were aware of its advantages in keeping everyone continually informed. Notably an intense social programme was a feature of the enrolment period as leading mothers inducted new members into the group as quickly as possible in order for the centre to continue to function. Whilst numbers were always a concern to the Playcentre, there were very great advantages in having a very small membership when it came to verbal exchange as the main source of communication, something that was not a possibility in the much larger Kindergarten

groups. Written information was available for reference but usually retained until mothers requested it. Ailly (Playcentre) explained:

> *There are policies you need to know, so Poppy showed me where they are and eventually, when I wanted to I was taking home these huge big manuals from the archives about things.*

The evidence that has been presented so far in research question five indicates that a lack of real communication existed between teachers and mothers in the teacher-led centres, firstly in opportunities for shared discussion and then in transmission of ideas. One of the ways that it had implications was that mothers took much longer at enrolment to understand the operation so that their contribution and therefore support was reduced. Bonny (Free Kindergarten) explained:

> *When I came here the teacher told me you read here, but I can't read so many things. I read little things, but not so many and some not at all.*

Bonny exemplified the particular problems experienced by migrant mothers. Whilst teachers persisted with written communication this did not mean they were unaware of the difficulties it sometimes posed for mothers such as Bonny. Dorothy (Free Kindergarten) said:

> *I think the spoken word conveys a deeper meaning than the written word. Some of the things that we might put in a newsletter a certain number of people will take on board, but if someone comes and actually has a conversation and hears someone speaking about something, it has perhaps more of an impact.*

Despite its inadequacy teachers indicated several reasons why they continued to use written transmission of information. Firstly it was expedient because they had very limited time for individual discussion with such a large membership. Kit (Community Kindergarten staff) argued:

I would really like to cut down on the numbers of children that we have coming here...That's what comes through in our questionnaire. We've found that the parents would like us to do more, but we can't do it unless we eliminate some of the factors contributing to it. We do observations and we do give back feedback to parents but there's 119 children attending in one week. It's very, very hard.

Secondly, teachers also had sincere beliefs that the professional way to communicate was through written text and that mothers, like themselves, would eventually learn to get all they needed from this type of information, if only they would read it. It should be said that mothers' preference for verbal exchange was not just contingent upon their skill level it was also a learning principle because they gained much more information within a social environment where they could share feedback and questions. At the same time it keyed into mothers' need for adult conversation because of the amount of time they spent alone with their child. Wenda (Playgroup) showed not only the loneliness of motherhood but also a lack of preparedness for the lifestyle, through limited provision of information in the community:

Before I started the Playgroups I felt just so isolated. You just feel absolutely alone, no adult company. It's hard slogger. I think people should warn you against that first before you have to go through I, maybe the midwives or whatever.

The lack of real communication between teachers and mothers in teacher-led centres as a result of the predominant use of written information reflected the different views they held that were never resolved. Teachers were still able to believe that mothers gained effective support through this transmission of information because of their understanding that it was a commodity they gave to mothers. They did not suspect that placing limitation upon socially co-operative processes actually inhibited mothers' access to support. In fact, teachers believed they were doing mothers a service by relieving them of the responsibility of decision making. Kit (Community Kindergarten) said:

We, the staff, do all the things that need to be done (for the centre programme)
at the staff meeting and we'll (then) put it out to the parents and parents just sign
it. They don't even read it and then they'll come back to me and say, I haven't
got this thing and I'll say, well you signed it. Oh, did I, oh well I don't agree
with that.

It was evident from the teacher interviews that despite their conviction that written
transmission of information was professional and expedient they knew that it was not an
entirely effective method of communicating with parents Joan (Kindergarten staff) said:

Its (difficult) to know what parents want because it's often not what we think
they want.

Although Joan like the other teachers did not expect to share the decision making with
mothers, they were still interested to know what they were thinking. Consequently they
used consultation processes that rather than inviting negotiation set out to affirm already
established practices. Outcome usually amounted to teachers intensifying their efforts to
change parents by educating them to use teachers' methods more effectively. The way
teachers approached mothers for information through teachers' written currency of
questionnaires was an example. Kit (Community Kindergarten staff) explained:

We put out a questionnaire every year to parents and that sort of gives an
evaluation of how we're doing, because there's sort of questions (like): How are
they finding areas of play, do they feel there's anything lacking in health and
safety measures, are they happy with this and are they happy with that? Have
they got any suggestions?

Expectedly, using this medium, teachers reported in their interviews they gained very
poor returns that they put down to a lack of interest. However, maternal interviews gave
insight into how mothers were unprepared to respond because of the unfamiliarity of
being asked for their opinions, as well as being asked for this in writing. The Free

Kindergarten had progressed further in their quest to learn more about mothers' views by attending a professional development course. Joan (Free Kindergarten staff) commented:

> *We've just done a whole day's training on communication and consultation and we talked about formulating questions and finding out what parents want. One suggestion was a graffiti board and you put a statement up and parents are able to write their feedback on there. Parents can write up something there anonymously. They're not going to put up their names and then you can go to bigger issues.*

Teachers had instituted the whiteboard but as suggested (chapter five, p.161) it was unsuccessful because it again employed written communication. In addition it expected mothers to write their comments in front of an audience. These outcomes suggested that whilst teachers learned new techniques through professional development, these were not associated with any insights concerning mothers' perspectives. At the same time the lack of success inferred that some types of professional support can only be effective when conducted on site, so that the facilitators are able to combine their support with contextual knowledge. However, a positive outcome of the Kindergarten teachers' efforts was it showed them in a role of being responsive to parents' needs. In addition it showed that despite a lack of overtly collaborative systems mothers were not entirely unsuccessful in their ability to influence management.

Although gaining information through a prevalent written medium was a considerable barrier for most mothers in the study this was not necessarily the case for everyone. Testifying to the individuality of support needs, a minority of mothers found written information presented a successful way of communicating, particularly because it provided reference material. Shirley (Playgroup) said of her child's personal information pocket at the centre, used for individual notices:

When you clear them out there's always a newsletter and information about the Kindy and about the last parent board meeting and you're pretty much au fait with what is happening behind the scenes.

It was evident even in a small sample that the three mothers who were most happy with the written communication represented a specific group, where mothers had been involved in higher education. Two had degrees and one was a journalist. One of the mothers Tilly (Community Kindergarten) said:

I get the newsletters. I think its once a month. I read them as soon as I get them.

Wenda (Playgroup) a journalist said of the newsletters:

I think they're good. They cover a lot. You know what the kiddies are doing each week. I keep them until the end of term just to check up on things. I always tell my husband what's in it and what they are doing. I read every single word. Most people probably don't but I'm a bit of a reader. I love to read and digest things. I read them as soon as I get them.

These positive views on written communication suggested teachers were satisfying the needs of a minority of mothers, but did not really view mothers individually or consider how their learning was influenced by personal style. The same communication issues did not arise in the Playcentre where staff and mothers represented a small closely knit group, where all centre business was transacted on the basis of verbal exchange. This promoted the depth of individual knowledge required within the group to provide effective personal support, something that was not a goal of the teacher-led centres.

5.3.2 Teachers' beliefs about formal parent education as effective support

The evidence presented so far in research question five has suggested that in the teacher-led services teachers' attitude to professionalism led them to conduct centre affairs through non-collaborative leadership, part of which was written communication. The next part of the findings documents teachers' beliefs about effective support consisting of information packages at enrolment, notices at activity sites and the main focus parent education sessions. These issues were particularly relevant for teachers as the Playcentre centre staff pre-dominantly used verbal exchange with documentation available for reference purposes. Field notes suggested mothers rarely used information at the activity sites in the Playgroup and the Community Kindergarten although this was further supplemented by printed cards of instructions given to parents to read when they were rostered help in the centres. Dorothy (Free Kindergarten staff) said:

> *Mothers learn from the general environment, all the things that are on the walls and talking to the teachers. They always want to talk about my teenagers and how I can work and be a mother.*

It seems that whilst teachers paid attention to these information sites (and they were not evident in the Playcentre) they were only marginally beneficial as educational tools because they were not referred to by any of the mothers as providing useful information. The reason seemed that apart from being written, they did not hold high priority for parents. It was not information mothers needed because they trusted teachers understood about the activities and the programme for their children. Instead most mothers reported overwhelmingly that the majority of their learning experiences came not from teachers' written information, but through social exchange and from observing and listening to teachers and peers during the course of sessions. In her first interview Shirley (Playgroup) demonstrated rather than the information being just conversation, it held significance for further reference:

I get information from the interaction between parents and children. You get
good tips, you get pointers, oh that's a good way to deal with that particular
issue, whatever, and you store it for later.

Likewise, Wenda (Playgroup) in her first interview reiterated the importance of verbal exchange:

I meet friends. I look forward to coming and seeing the teachers, I mean my son
does too, it's good to have both. You share ideas, like places to go, things to eat,
not just ideas because you do get a bit stale on things sometimes.

In this commentary Wenda showed the importance of the centre to herself personally by putting herself before her son. She also mentioned the wide ranging ideas discussed in the centre indicating that she gained support from teachers as well as other mothers. She likewise emphasised the usefulness of the special incidental support provided by one of the teachers, recording it on a regular basis in her diary because her son's behaviour frequently needed attention. The next quote from her second interview emphasised the importance of teachers' informal help and how much more effective it was than seminars:

I haven't actually been to (a seminar), but informal training...I would say that's
the mothers talking to each other or me talking to Mrs Louise...things like that
you can actually learn more that way.

The seminars being infrequent were unresponsive to mothers' incremental support requirements. Teachers organised them once or twice a year and they were unique to the teacher-led groups. They were either educationally or health related and a similar range of topics was explored each year. Both teachers and mothers indicated topics were teacher selected without consultation. As was indicated (chapter five, p.149) it was usually the prerogative of head teachers, there being little discussion amongst staff. The lack of involvement in the organisation of these events had the effect of generating low

interest levels and no motivation to attend. Arrangements were also often unrealistic without considering a mother's perspective. Even teachers were aware of this. But although they knew things were sometimes difficult for mothers they did not look for other solutions because they believed learning to be a discipline. Nettie (Playgroup staff) considered:

Not many people came to the course because it was five Saturdays in a row. I developed the parent education programme all by myself.

Nettie's words illustrated how barriers to mothers' attendance arose out of a lack of consultation. Not including parents in the decision making for education sessions was commensurate with teachers' non-collaborative practices that were influenced by beliefs that their training made them better qualified to know what was most profitable for mothers. Apart from a lack of involvement in decision-making processes mothers gave multiple reasons why they were unenthusiastic about attending educational seminars. For one thing they had expectations that the centre programme was child, not adult focused. For the same reason they did not necessarily read or relate to notices about parent education. Ninette ((Community Kindergarten staff) explained:

(If you don't issue a personal invitation) a lot of people think that's not for me. They don't mean me. There are a lot of unconfident parents out there.

Joan (Free Kindergarten, staff) indicated the usual way of alerting parents was by newsletter. As well, field notes indicated advertisements on the various notice-boards. This suggested it was a lonely experience making an autonomous decision about going to the seminars. As well, in their free time mothers preferred to relax and seminars were not conducted with a social focus. Wenda (Playgroup) explained:

Honestly if I had the night off I would be going somewhere I really, really wanted to go not just to something informative.

The general lack of association for parent education seminars was not confined to mothers as Louise, who was Playgroup teacher, also indicated she had never attended (chapter five, p.150.). Joan (Free Kindergarten, staff) explained:

> *We have had two sessions and it has been quite limiting the number of parents coming. I just find they don't go down, they're not terribly successful.*

It appeared that whilst teachers were concerned about the poor attendance at seminars as their attitudes were child-focused they declined to take any radical action, attributing a lack of success to a host of legitimate reasons. Nettie (Playgroup staff) said:

> *Sometimes mothers mention the reasons (why they don't come) if (the topic) has been covered at school recently. If they feel they have all the information already they don't need it.*

Many other reasons mothers gave for not attending seminars related to lack of time; no babysitters; difficulties associated with timeframes and having other priorities. Shirley (Playgroup) said:

> *I haven't actually attended any they've held...Its just juggling things because my husband has to work rosters and I find it really hard to plan ahead. I've got no idea when they're on and also during the week I find it really hard to get a babysitter, so many things working and being a mother.*

Tiredness was an issue frequently cited. Wenda (Playgroup) remarked:

> *(Parent education seminars) are probably good, but I haven't been to one because I am just so whacked at the end of the day from looking after him. I wouldn't consider going out to do anything extra. But if there was a book I could read and I was interested I would prefer to do that because it's in my time when I want to do it.*

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The fact that there were many important reasons why mothers did not attend seminars, apart from a lack of interest this also made it easy for teachers not to take action. Mothers in the teacher-led sessions (unlike those in the Playcentre who were most enthusiastic) never included education seminars as pleasurable experiences in diary entries. A major issue was that seminars were conducted from a deficit model by staff unfamiliar with adult facilitation and therefore uncertain how to involve parents in an interactive learning process. Tilly (Community Kindergarten) said:

> *It was pretty much just you sit there and listen. It's pretty hard to take it all in. I didn't like it at all and it didn't feel like if you had anything to say you could say it. It was sort of like just sit there and be quiet and listen. That's my only experience.*

Whilst a lack of attendance at seminars was the main indicator of low interest levels there was a minority of parents who did come and enjoy the seminars. Characteristics of these mothers were: They were usually committee members, which set them apart from their peers because they had been involved in the decision making and planning around the event. At the same time they socialised with the teachers and other committee members who had a history of attendance. As well, their children were usually more independent when they committee status was attained, giving them more time for involvement.

5.3.3 The social nature of effective support

In the centre that was seeking to improve communication with parents there was also some cause for optimism in teachers' understanding of parent education by the way they were incorporating it within social functions. Success had occurred in the Kindergarten as a result of teachers' sensitivity to the overwhelming attendance at social events held at the centre. As a consequence they were focusing on more specific integration of

social interaction with educational functions in an endeavour to better meet mothers'
needs. Joan (Free Kindergarten staff) explained:

We've had two (parent education evenings) we did one on learning choices and
one on assessment and we only got about eight parents. But then we had a fun
evening, a pyjama night and we had a huge attendance so the parents are
obviously happy to put them selves out to come to something when the children
are involved. It was a huge success and it kind of indicated to me that those sorts
of evenings are much better and if you can put a bit of parent education in.

The social element associated with the fun evening described by Joan was responsible
for its unqualified success, something that was beginning to be more recognised by the
centre. The same focus was evident in the support mothers reported in the parent-led
group as a result of Playcentre training courses. Unlike mothers in other groups
Playcentre mothers recorded the courses and achievements as supportive events in their
diaries. One mother, Ailly appended material to her diary from her assignments,
including feedback from her tutors. The Playcentre training also had the added
advantage of connecting mothers with the wider association so that they extended their
networks with mothers from other centres. Whilst the focus of the courses was
educational and Playcentre staff (that included all the mothers on a rostered basis)
viewed them as a significant feature of their centre, they did not consider them as the
only effective support resourced from their centre. Mothers' commentary illustrated the
particular support they had gained through their Playcentre training. Manon (Playcentre
staff) related:

Our training is fabulous. It's just wonderful. It is a big part of why I joined the
Playcentre. I was thinking about doing a correspondence course for early
childhood training and my friend said, why don't you join Playcentre, you get it
all for free.

Mothers reported two most important features associated with support were: mothers had a choice about which courses they selected as well as them being social learning experiences. Ailly reported:

I made a choice, because I wanted to do these other two little ones (courses) out of the way and I didn't want the observing play to be broken up over the holidays. I thought I'd better start fresh at the beginning of the year.

An important component of the courses was the style of delivery. Manon (Playcentre staff) commented:

It was never sit down and get lectured to. A lot of it is discussion. At the beginning its all about discussion, blah, blah, blah and as you go on you get into a lot more detail and you do all your observations, but it still centres very heavily on group discussion.

An added attraction for Playcentre mothers was that training exposed them to further opportunities for social benefits beyond their own centre within the further networks of the Federation. Ailly (Playcentre) explained:

We finished up the course early. We swapped phone numbers with some people we already knew and we're going to meet each other at other courses. I was sitting beside (someone) who was from the centre with two other people who are observing play with me in their houses. You meet up with some cool people.

As well as the extended Playcentre network being an important support feature this was carried over into wider links with the community. Whereas teachers viewed their centres as separate organisations, Playcentre activities transcended the premises where mothers gave practical help to neighbours as well as using the venue for other functions and children's parties with access through personal keys. The culmination of new responsibilities, social support and increased educational knowledge built mothers' self-

esteem an important feature being increased success in parenting their own child. Stephanie commented:

> *I've noticed (my daughter) will look at me to do something and now I feel more confident, I don't have to feel I let her down because I couldn't deal with this situation. I had never anticipated my role as an educator, an early childhood educator and this would go beyond what I had already done and the longer I am there the more I sort of realise well I'm a big part of that.*

Mothers' growing levels of confidence were self-perpetuating as they took on new roles both formally and informally. These increasingly exposed them to leadership roles and ultimately increased their social status within the community. Ailly said:

> *Wow you can go to the ends of the earth (with the courses). It's so much fun and I've done the hard yard.*

Evidence so far has suggested that teachers and mothers did not have shared views on support and whereas teachers believed it had narrow eductaional dimensions, mothers viewed it as having a much wider application. Shirley (Playgroup) explained:

> *People have experiences around potty training and things like that. Its all new ground for me and (its good) just hearing how other people have gone about coping with TV and the health side of things.*

The above finding has important implications because it means that teachers' view of what was effective support was actually a very narrow focus. In practice teachers made a much more significant contribution to mothers' support than they believed they did through everyday networking, even if this was unacknowledged by teachers as *effective* support. The data showed there were two main ways in which this occurred. Firstly teachers provided important facilitation on *regular routine occasions*, such as at "separation" and transition to school. Then secondly they were *part of everyday*

exchanges with the entire community that represented a considerable resource for mothers, both teachers and other parents. Nina (Community Kindergarten) a committee mother described the planning behind a session related to regular routine support provided by teachers:

> *At our last (committee) meeting we've talked about different topics that we might do for parent education this year, because last year parents didn't show much interest. One of the (ideas) was we're going to get teachers from a couple of schools to come and talk about getting kids ready for school, but not the educational way, you know there are around 700 children...but preparing them for entry, it's a huge vision. (Going to Kindy) is just dipping the toe in and then the full time a very easy transition (to school).*

Although for teachers regular routines like settling families into their centres were aimed solely at serving child-focused purposes, mothers perceived them as also providing effective support for themselves, because of the close interconnections with their child. During everyday exchanges teachers contributed effective support for mothers. The data suggested there were several different dimensions to this. Teachers being mothers themselves were not only empathetic from personal experience but could project discussion that provided mothers with insights into later stages of development. Ninette (Community Kindergarten, staff)

> *Rearing a child comes as a hell of a shock. It's a very complex business. I think the change in your life...you've got to go through it to understand it. Mothers are always asking me about how to deal with teenagers and how I can work and be a mother.*

At the same time teachers' life experience was valuable in the way they were confidantes for younger mothers, something that did not occur in the same way in the Playcentre where staff and mothers were peers in a similar age range. Ninette (Community Kindergarten staff) observed:

I get the sense they see us as being older. I am older than a lot of the mothers here and more experienced and yes they do value our opinion.

It has already been documented how teachers provided incidental support for mothers (chapter four, p.118). As well, teachers' training was an important factor in giving professional advice. Ninette (Community Kindergarten staff) reported an incident where a teacher capitalised on a contextual learning opportunity to provide support:

We've had two cases lately with separation anxiety and I actually found a really good article in a New Zealand magazine through my studies and I ran it past Kit and I've photocopied it and I have approached them, would you like to read this? They've been very grateful. It's been a bit should I approach them or not approach them, but I've been pleased with the results.

Similarly, Nina (Community Kindergarten) explained how useful teaching information was in the transition to school:

I used always to write Peter's name in block capitals and I noticed Kit one day writing it like we used to in primary school and that's something that I have followed.

The absence of mentor-type expertise from experienced and fully trained personnel was noted as absent within this parent-led centre where only one mother had the required qualifications for the centre to function and where mothers experienced only peer relationships within the organisation, Martel (Playcentre) explained:

Jilly our field worker is a wonderful person. She's more educated. The parent leadership style at the centre means there's not really any one person that sort of runs the place. I look up to her when she comes on board to help teach me new things. I kind of need somebody to be the boss. I like somebody to tell me what to do quite often. I'll get involved and that but I also like somebody to take charge

and that's something I don't find here. There's no one person I can go to. I can go to everybody and ask them something and everybody will know what is going on, but there's no one person that comes out as knowing what's what.

Martel's interview suggested for some mothers at least the guidance of trained expertise was an essential ingredient of support. As well as the incidental conversations teachers had with mothers another aspect of support was the role modelling that occurred. Mothers similarly selected role models from amongst their peers as was illustrated by Stephanie (Playcentre) described the process that in this instance concerned mothers:

She's just getting to the age of taking toys off other kids and the other kids don't like it and I don't know what to do, so I can watch the other parents who have it sorted out and the great answer is distraction... (The centre) is a great un-tapped support system for women. I'm just coming into my own. I'm sure there will be more I receive as I get more confident.

5.3.4   Summary

Staff demonstrated different views in the teacher-led centres and parent-led service regarding effective support. Whereas teachers believed support was interchangeable with parent education Playcentre staff had a wider spectrum view that encompassed both parenting and personal support. Whilst teachers espoused a traditional "top down" delivery of de-contextualised information to parents on occasion, Playcentre members participated in Playcentre training. Not only was this based upon a socio-cultural model that was integrated into the everyday programme but it also exposed them to the wider association of the Playcentre community opening up further opportunities for networking. This typified the strong links of Playcentre beyond the confines of the centre to a wider view of community that included practical support for neighbours. An important aspect of this was the self-determination mothers had in gaining their own support. Despite teachers' sincerity in wanting to help parents in the teacher-led centres

this often meant doing things for mothers that denied mothers the active role necessary for generating support. At the same time teachers' frequent reliance on written transmission of information was an unresponsive communication system for many mothers. Whilst this also prevented the collaborative processes inherent in gaining support it was not an entirely negative outcome because mothers indicated they did not rely on teachers' formal systems. Instead they demonstrated the majority of their support came through everyday exchanges with both teacher and other parents in the community. Whilst written information was also available to Playcentre mothers it was used in conjunction with extensive discussion and then mainly for reference purposes. The data put forward as evidence for teachers' beliefs about effective support culminated in the following theoretical statement:

Proposition 5:

Formal support involves planned delivery of information including parent education; informal support involves the exchange of everyday incidental information through social networks

5.4   Research question 6

To what extent can the early childhood centres be viewed as learning communities where the contribution of all participants is recognised and valued in terms of learning and social support?

Table 7

Significant themes relevant to research question 6: To what extent can the early childhood centres be viewed as learning communities where the contribution of all participants is recognised and valued in terms of learning and social support?

Centre leadership	Learning community characteristics of centres
	Formal social system
Teacher-led/parent-led	Induction protocols/atmosphere of welcome
Teacher-led/parent-led	Responsive to mother-initiated questions
Teacher-led/parent-led	Responsive to cyclical nature of membership
Teacher-led/parent-led	Support is intentional for families
Teacher-led/parent-led	Support is routine and for both mother/child
Parent-led	Support is intention for mothers' personal needs
Parent-led	Collaborative decision making/home/phone/centre
Parent-led	Commitment to training/expectations of learning
Parent-led	Development/maintenance local community links
Parent-led	Frequent social contact/functions/trips
Parent-led	Associated with Playcentre/community networks
Parent-led	Self determination/choice/contribution range of roles
Parent-led	Able to practice new knowledge in centre programme
Parent-led	Parent space/adult facilities/regular informal conversation
	Informal social system
Teacher-led/parent-led	Exchange of minutiae of everyday life
Teacher-led/parent-led	Collaborative discussion/shared experiences
Teacher-led/parent-led	Learn through observation of teacher/parent role models
Teacher-led/parent-led	Self determination/contribution in range of roles
Teacher-led/parent-led	Links with outside community
Teacher-led/parent-led	Opportunities for relationship building
Teacher-led/parent-led	Wide spectrum information/integrated authentic learning
Teacher-led/parent-led	Able to practice new learning
Teacher-led/parent-led	Empathy of same status in motherhood

Table 7 shows the difference between the teacher-led centres and the parent-led service with regard to the operation of socially co-operative systems by which learning communities are characterised, by the contrasting themes that emerged from the data. However, whilst mothers experienced limited self-determination in teachers' formal systems, informally they had opportunities for contribution in all centres. The final part of chapter five discusses these in relationship to how far centres in the study can be said to have operated as learning communities. According to the literature the definition cannot be applied arbitrarily, as learning communities are subject to specified parameters. For the purposes of this study they are defined as associated with collaborative decision making where there are opportunities to contribute and implement new learning. In this regard the study findings established the defining factor in the communities was leadership. Whilst the nature of the parent-led group gave mothers ample opportunity for self-determination, social co-operation was very limited in the teacher-led centres. However, the advantage to mothers was that despite the difficulties they encountered in this regard because gaining support is an active process they were able to be opportunists in whatever they encountered in centres.

The literature indicated mothers' support requirements: relationship building and self-determination are much controlled by the naturally occurring structures in centres. This was exemplified in the study by the way Playcentre and Playgroup mothers were advantaged because their type of organisation allowed for them to routinely spending the whole session together. However, whilst the investigator had anticipated structural influences in the research design by selecting centres that were likely to involve mothers most, study findings suggested that an important factor in determining outcomes was the way teachers interpreted the structures. The discussion continues by highlighting how teachers' attitudes influenced mothers' support outcomes, in particular by the way they excluded them from decision making (Wenda, Playgroup, chapter five, p.184). In contrast Poppy (Playcentre staff) explained how mothers were encouraged to expand their horizons and assume leadership roles, if this was their goal:

The people who do the training, they are all Playcentre people. It's all emergent leadership. They are always encouraging people to come through and it starts off by just leading workshops. There are many different roles within Playcentre.

Ailly (Playcentre) likewise reported how she had asked about the support she had heard was offered before making a commitment to training at Playcentre (chapter 5, p.150). The same expectations that support was an aspect of the programme were not met by mothers in the teacher-led centres where the predominant focus was the early childhood programme. However, this was not unexpected as mothers attending these services were not required to make the same commitment of time and energy to their centre. There was evidence throughout the study that mothers' chances for involvement, attention and support were very much increased whenever their requirements were aligned with the needs of child and centre. Whilst there was less emphasis on parent support in the teacher-led services, teachers were still convinced of the important benefits for the child if families were involved, as well as this being a legislated part of the Early Childhood Curriculum. Joan (Free Kindergarten, staff) explained the view of staff in this regard (chapter five, p.144). The difference was that it had less emphasis than their child-focused goals. It was also defined more narrowly as parent education and despite teachers' competence with children they did not transfer the same principles to adult learning.

5.4.1   Collaborative decision making as a hallmark of learning communities

In the same way teachers' attitudes determined mothers' expectations of support they were also responsible for providing a leadership that did not operate according to principles of social co-operation. The chapter continues with an explanation of how this affected mothers' ability to make active decisions that were the basis of support. Ailly (Playcentre) identified mothers' requirement for an active role (chapter four, p.96). Teachers' beliefs that teachers should be the decision makers in their centres were primarily driven by concerns about sharing power with untrained parents as illustrated

by Dorothy (chapter 5, p.153). The teachers thought allowing mothers to contribute lay information at a responsible level risked jeopardising the centre operation, as well as being dubious that mothers were able to offer anything useful to their peers. Ninette (Community Kindergarten staff) believed relationships between teachers and mothers were productive in terms of gaining advice, whereas this was not the case between untrained peers:

> *Mothers discuss (parenting issues) but probably in a more joking sort of way. Oh, you'll never guess what he did today? Whereas with us it would be, what do you think about what he did today?*

Likewise teachers' view of mothers as lay people was that they did not extend their children inferring they were less aware of their capabilities than teachers. Nettie (Playgroup staff) said:

> *Mothers of two and three year olds don't expect enough from their children. They don't think they can do anything. We always encourage the child to do these things themselves and mothers go, oh, I didn't think my child could do that.*

Teachers also demonstrated a generalised view of mothers that they were only able to perform tasks under high supervision. Joan (Free Kindergarten staff) explained the policy of having staff alone access informational resources:

> *Our priority is to get the resources up (for parents). We do work one-to-one with parents, so if we see there is a need we are all quite skilled enough. I've got a really big file of information on health and safety. We can access that information. Obviously it would be preferable to have parents access it themselves, but it's just not an option.*

These examples from teachers' interviews suggested that teachers were not confident that mothers were able to collaborate with them in responsible roles. As a consequence

mothers in teacher-led centres had much less scope for personal autonomy and contribution than in the Playcentre where mothers were able to make their own choices from a range of responsibilities. In the Kindergartens and Playgroup, roles were not only teacher designated and directed, but also of low status so that mothers often felt disempowered. Coupled with their general vulnerability as new mothers this tended to reinforce a lack of confidence that decelerated friendship building as well as contribution.

Although one or two mothers expressed dissatisfaction regarding the lack of shared decision making, interview comments suggested that this was all part of the centre culture that mothers had learned initially so they expected that teachers would make all the decisions. Wenda (Playgroup) commented on her frequent inability to engage a teacher to listen to her concerns:

> *Both me and the other mothers that I spoke to, she brought it up with the same teacher and they just sort of palmed it off...I was thinking I should start a petition...It just shows how many people don't speak up, her husband wouldn't even ring. I think people should speak up. I do tend to go to the Head Teacher because she's in charge. There's no point in going to an underling. You're just wasting your time really.*

Wenda showed unusual determination in her attempts to get teachers to listen to her point of view. She discussed this at length in her interview as well as the difficulties inherent in trying to bring about change on her own, not being able to get other mothers to support her for fear of repercussions. Along with other mothers who wanted to make a contribution beyond the routine rostered roles teachers devised, Wenda told how she found creative ways of incorporating personal interests into self-styled roles that gave her a greater sense of satisfaction as well as benefiting the centre community. Other mothers had installed mosaics in the kitchen and made a button jar and Wenda had established herself as the centre "problem solver".

I am an ideas person... I can pipe up. If they've got a problem then they ask me. I would think about it and come up with a solution. They had dogs getting in and I said why don't you put a strip across and I was going to donate some of that, but it was too flexible so they got a professional in to do my idea.

Teachers were happy for these contributions to be made because they enriched the centre without setting a precedence that changed the programme in any way. The only time teachers did work together with mothers in decision making roles was when the latter became committee members. Interview data suggested there was a different quality to these relationships that made teachers more confident working with mothers, as well as the principle applying that mothers' contribution coincided with centre needs. Dorothy (Free Kindergarten staff) explained:

Last night we had a committee meeting. We had some new parents arrive. Now there were parents there with skills like fundraising and finances and you could see them just wanting to use those skills again now. They've got these skills. They're sitting at home. They're not using them and here's an avenue where we can use those skills and they just about leaped at us, I'll do that. I'll do that, wonderful.

Another reason why teachers found it easier to work with mothers on the committee was because they were more confident within individual relationships with senior mothers with whom they were very familiar. This highlighted the cyclical nature of all the early childhood communities in the study whereby new mothers progressed to an experienced status prior to their child leaving for school. Poppy (Playcentre staff) explained:

It takes a long time to settle in and feel confident enough to become really involved in Playcentre life. It does take a while. I can remember when I first started, the people who had been there for several years. It was like, My God, how do they know all that? It's like I'm never going to get there, but of course you do. Eventually it's a level playing field.

Poppy's words suggested that maturation and experience were important factors in gaining social status in the Playcentre community. As these same processes were also true of teacher-led centres it seems probable that teachers found it easier to share decision making with more senior mothers for their increased knowledge.

5.4.2 Playcentre training and implementation of new knowledge

In the Playcentre as well as senior mothers adding value to their status through experience, increased social status also occurred through their training. Commensurate with the literature regarding learning communities, an important feature of them is being able to apply new knowledge. Ailly (Playcentre) enthused about being able to take control of a responsible role in her centre:

> *I liaised with our co-ordinator (because I wanted) to revolutionise the system, because I intended to be the equipment officer for our next AGM. I'd been to Association meetings, so (I approached our field worker and she agreed to do it), ever since she has been asking how I was and it was like, wow! Wow its sort of stepped up the cavalry, especially because (I'm it) rather than the co-ordinator.*

Ailly's interest in her training was reinforced further by the benefits she saw in it for her child, who as a result acted as a catalyst for her development. She said:

> *It would be different working with different children other than your own, because I find when I'm setting up an activity I actually want Mark to be right in line with it. When I am setting up something for his personal development and hey it's got to be good to get other children involved too but really I'm doing it for him.*

Another important aspect of training for the Playcentre mothers was that it networked them into the wider Playcentre Association. This not only increased possibilities for their personal networks, but allowed them insight into the operation of other groups and access to further resources for themselves and their families.

5.4.3 The concept of partnership

Evidence from the interviews showed the benefits of learning communities were less well defined in the teacher-led groups. Unlike the parent-led centre not only was there no collaborative decision making, but also there was limited transmission of trained knowledge in teachers' formal programmes. Whilst interviews with teachers indicated they were serious about implementation of the legislated requirements of partnership there was no evidence that they achieved success interpreting the equity that it infers. In the same way it was not a shared concept with parents. None of the mothers had any knowledge of Te Whaariki or believed they were involved in a partnership relationship with teachers (apart from Playcentre mothers who had encountered these ideas in their training). Dorothy (Free Kindergarten staff) explained:

> *We (the staff) are happy to work together and so we generate a positive feeling*
> *even before people come in the door. I think because we are all dedicated and*
> *we all share that philosophy of being here for families, without losing sight of*
> *the fact that we're here first and foremost for the child, but it goes hand-in-hand*
> *with offering support to parents too.*

Dorothy suggested that whilst teachers were enthused and positive about the idea of partnership with parents it remained at a philosophical level as well as being secondary to the child-focus. At the same time whilst teachers gained inspiration for their practice from the Early Childhood Curriculum there was no evidence that they found it useful in the development of partnerships. Ninette (Community Kindergarten staff) said:

You can read Te Whaariki and get a guideline but I think what we do is just from our experience of life. I think (its use is) it validates us a little bit more, what we do, rather than it's just pulled out of the sky.

Nettie (Playgroup, staff) had the view that Te Whaariki was:

Just the regulations, it doesn't tell you what to do but you should find ways of doing it. There are a lot of books around (to help you). It's not a manual for how to do your work is it?

Although teacher interviews indicated a lack of understanding regarding formal implementation of partnerships, there was evidence that teachers had the ability to do this because of the success they achieved incidentally. Wenda (Playgroup) explained in her second interview how her teacher was working on a behaviour management plan with her and her child:

It's just the little hurdles. If (my son) hits someone one day and we both work at it, me and the teacher (together), just really simple stuff, it works.

Incidental support by teachers was exemplified in the Playcentre where it was associated with everyday implementation of principles from Te Whaariki.

5.4.4 Summary

In considering the degree to which the principles of learning communities can be said to have been operating in the study centres, two main criteria were explored: social co-operation in decision making and implementation of new knowledge. The data showed a marked difference in support outcomes between the teacher-led and parent-led groups due to their different leadership structures. In the teacher-led groups teachers showed a general reluctance to share decision making with mothers that was attributed to teacher

beliefs about their role with parents as well as their reluctance to accept lay knowledge as currency in their centres. Teachers whilst displaying uncertainty about implementing partnerships with mothers nevertheless achieved success working with them informally. The Playcentre demonstrated that a successful learning community was possible when all mothers provided leadership complemented by training. Data relevant to research question six led to the theoretical statement:

Proposition 6:
Lack of power sharing by teachers reduces the effectiveness of centres as learning communities.

5.5 Chapter summary

Chapter five explored staff data documenting beliefs about their role in facilitating support, the nature of effective support for mothers and the operation of services according to learning community principles. It was evident that teachers' views did not coincide with those of mothers in the Playcentre who constituted the leadership and who responded as mothers rather than teachers. The Playcentre structure had the advantage of being established upon socially co-operative principles that gave mothers the self-determination in collective decision making necessary for active contribution upon which support is contingent. In the teacher-led services teachers' interpretation of centre structures was shown to be the main determinant of how these communities functioned rather than decision making being negotiated as in the parent group. Teachers' beliefs about support as a passive process dispensed to mothers as recipients matched their professional ideas about the difference between trained and lay knowledge that made them reluctant to establish collaborative partnerships with mothers. Participation by mothers in these services was not helped by limited communication that did nothing to reconcile the differences between teachers' narrow educational and mothers' wide spectrum view of support. Teachers' view of adult support and learning as a passive process, limited confidence in mothers' capacity to contribute from a lay position and

the lack of confidence they experienced in facilitating partnerships was responsible for limited social co-operation in the teacher-led services. Conversely Playcentre staff operated upon the basis of shared leadership so that all mothers had the same opportunity for sharing in the decision making with self-determining personal roles.

Although the degree of social co-operation practised formally in teacher-led programmes did not equate with the principles characteristic of learning communities, this did not mean that mothers were unable to practice the self determination required for support. Evidence suggests that rather than these mothers just being reliant on teachers' planned programmes they also capitalised on informal support through everyday exchanges. Within the informal systems mothers encountered greater possibilities for more equal relationships with teachers that enhanced authentic social learning opportunities. The advantage of the informal system was that besides capitalising on teachers' experience and trained insight, mothers also gained a range of support from their peers. In this regard they may be said to have gained support through the networks of their entire early childhood community. In the Playcentre this even extended beyond the bounds of the premises into the wider community. Chapter six discusses the findings documented in chapter four concerning mothers' active role in their own support. Similarly chapter seven, (the second discussion chapter) considers the dual formal and informal response to mothers' support by the four early childhood centres in the study.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS
Relationships of support (Propositions 1-3)

6.1   Introduction

Chapters six and seven discuss the results of the study that were documented in chapters four and five, according to the six emergent theoretical propositions (See Figure 2 for the developmental process p.90). These six propositions were refined down from 12 (Appendix P) as a result of the iterative process. They prescribe a natural division into two separate themes. The first theme: Mothers actively promoted their own support through relationships is explored in chapter six. The second theme: Centres made a dual response to mothers' support needs through both formal and informal systems is the subject of chapter seven. The three propositions exploring the first theme are:

Proposition 1: Support is contingent upon the active contribution of the mothers themselves.

Proposition 2: Support is conditional upon the development of relationships of trust at different levels within the centre community.

Proposition 3: Effective early childhood communities are responsive to the changing needs of mothers.

Chapter six continues with discussions related to the above three propositions. They are then followed by a chapter summary that incorporates figure 3 which shows how mothers' active relationship building was the basis of their support in the focus early childhood centres.

According to the aims of the study the participating early childhood centres were confirmed as important support resources for mothers, attributable by the propositions to a range of conditions. Whilst support has been established as an essential element in mothers' lives because of its association with reducing stress (Powell, 1998), its availability in early childhood centres makes them an important focus in local networks (Meade & Podmore, 2002; Walker & Riley, 2001). Meade and Podmore believed recognition of the benefits of early childhood centres in this regard was due to a general acceptance of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development that established the interrelatedness of social systems within communities. As a consequence of this, the authors traced a shift from judging the acceptability of early childhood institutions according to the time children still spent with their mothers, to a changing model where centres provide a range of services that promote care for children, families and the community.

Mothers in the study accessed benefits through their own pro-activity in building and maintaining relationships that are the catalysts of support (Wylie et al., 1996). The processes involved: selecting and learning the culture of a centre, then routinely meeting and engaging with other community members long enough to develop and sustain relationships. Whilst it constituted an active process, mothers were still reliant on a reciprocal response from centres to provide a suitable environment for it to take place. Not unexpectedly mothers encountered a range of outcomes from within the different service structures. Apart from centres representing potential for companionship they also attracted mothers for their considerable resources in parenting knowledge that was an outcome of these relationships. Informational support was the most prevalent form of support activated in the study, something that was confirmed by other authors (Galinsky, 1990; Stevens, 1988). Galinsky believed the reason for this was that different life stages bring their own challenges and prompt individuals to seek out new sets of knowledge to meet problem solving demands. In gaining this support from centres mothers were advantaged by its availability within naturally occurring networks in their immediate residential locality, believed by Larner (1997) to facilitate benefits through routine access. Proximity not only promoted regular attendance but also increased possibilities

for servicing new relationships in the immediate neighbourhood in accordance with Caruso (2000) who argued there is current rediscovery of community in appreciation of the needs it fulfils.

6.2 Proposition 1: Support is contingent upon the active contribution of the mothers themselves.

Mothers' active response to gaining support through first seeking out a socially compatible early childhood community was a complex and energetic task that belied the vulnerable image associated with new mothers. Anderson and Nairn (2005) described mothers' experiences during this period as both isolating and demanding, not only because of individual needs but also because their personal ability to achieve desired goals was highly variable, being connected to such things as: motivation, expectations, support definition, and personal characteristics. The socially driven selection of a centre was mothers' first demonstration of active processes, that rather than being haphazard, were intentionally focused on achieving a good social fit, essential for maximum support. Cochran et al. (1990) likewise confirmed the importance of compatibility between support partners as an important condition of effective support. Mothers in the study measured potential support by the initial responsiveness of staff, as well as the "atmosphere" they encountered when first visiting a centre. K.Powell (2005) affirmed welcoming environments are important and at the same time are associated with well-informed practices. The deliberate way in which mothers selected a centre was also documented by Friedrich (1997) who related this to evidence of resourceful planning for personal reinforcement. Similarly Hughes and McNaughton (1999b) recorded similar findings, focusing on the motivation as being all the more remarkable because it was projected towards future expectations rather than present tangible rewards. At the same time in the present study mothers' socially driven purpose was shown to be involuntary, with mothers believing that rather than meeting their own needs they were focused on finding a suitable educational programme for their child.

However, evidence suggested rather than this being the case, mothers' reasons for rejecting or favouring a centre were invariably related to their own social needs, rather than anything child-related. Larner (1997) found similarly that undoubtedly mothers do enrol their child in an early childhood centre with other expectations than those of gaining personal or parenting role support. Whilst Cochran et al. (1990) believed this was a natural response translated into mothers' strong social drive, Renwick (1985) argued it reflected the all consuming nature of a child's requirements. In the face overwhelming child-involvement, not only was it difficult for mothers extricate themselves, they found it equally hard to define and consider their own needs. Smith et al. (2000) believed likewise, that even if mothers do realise their own needs, because they are consumed with the demands of the child focus as the main issue of their lives, they ignore what they view at the time as issues of lesser importance.

In the present study the explanation of mothers' socially driven purpose was confirmed by the way the selection process gained momentum once they had gained experience through the first centre they contacted. Even although previously they may not have been aware of it, they were immediately alerted to the impact the centre was going to have on their own life as well as that of their child. Therefore, rather than enrolling in the first centre they contacted, they added it to their repertoire of experiences so that they were better informed to make a final selection. Mothers then began a frequently lengthy quest around several local centres until they found one that was completely satisfactory. Despite the energies involved according to Bowman (1997) rather than it being a waste of time, the freedom to choose from a broad band of services is a necessary part of the support process as it promotes empowerment and self-sufficiency. At the same time, Gable and Cole (2000) argued it does however make it more difficult to come to a decision, because it complicates the process and its resolution is finally accomplished through interaction with community networks. The idea that the final selection was decided upon through social support is compatible with the way mothers in the study only engaged permanently with a centre when they had begun to enjoy developing relationships.

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Although mothers initially took great care when choosing a centre, ultimately their longer term satisfaction in support and even continued attendance at the centre rested on the degree to which the relationship potential they had anticipated was realised. As the stabilising factor of centre engagement when mothers did not find a friend within a reasonable timeframe, irrespective of the degree of their child's involvement, mothers looked for companionship elsewhere. Kerslake Hendricks et al. (2004) confirmed the fragility of membership and the difficulties associated with families' engagement with centres before relationships are firmly established. In the current study the instability and inevitable low support that existed when mothers remained socially unconnected reflected a learned helpless response, whereby they were disappointed that the considerable effort involved had met with little success and apart from moving on they did not know what to do. It is likely that building networks through early childhood centres was particularly significant for mothers in the study because by choosing sessional services they anticipated more personal involvement. They were less likely than mothers who were employed outside the home to have access to other networks. Powell et al. (2005) made similar suggestions about the significance of the social networks of Playcentre for those who use them, arguing that in more isolated locations as in rural areas they often represented the primary source of adult socialisation and support for parents of young children.

It was significant that the most social activity in all study centres was manifested in the Playcentre because it was important to mothers and in this centre, as the leaders they were in control of the decision making. Ensuring a good fit with the centre to gain the most effective support was met with a reciprocal selection process instigated by the centre. The centre leaders first interviewed prospective members and then a collaborative decision was made as to their suitability. Apart from needing to assess compatibility Playcentre mothers were aware they needed to work as a team to ensure the service's continuation. As a consequence of the need for the centre to function there was more compulsion not only to participate, but also to assume responsibility and training that was not available in other services. Serving the needs of the centre and gaining knowledge and empowerment at the same time showed membership to be a

symbiotic process. The cohesion that the frequent social activity generated between the members coupled with the expectations that support was an intentional part of the process made for a particularly reinforcing environment. Mothers not only gained an impression at enrolment that they could expect this, but it was continually reinforced and modelled by the group. Elsewhere, Powell et al. (2005) described the same positive results in playcentres where socialisation was central to the creation of social capital through parents' perpetual interaction and collaboration.

The social capital evident in the study Playcentre contrasted widely with the programmes in the teacher-led services. Here there was not only a general lack of facilities for mothers to connect informally that necessitated their meeting elsewhere, but also this was not supplemented by the organisation of formal social functions. The reason for the lack of social space for adults was attributable to the child-focused aims in the centres where such activities for adults were viewed as separate and therefore outside the regular programme. At the same time, there was also no perceived need for parents to meet and discuss issues as in the Playcentre, because they only played minor roles in the decision making. As mothers assimilated these understandings as part of the induction process, having teachers assume all the responsibility in centres was part of their expectations. However, it was shown to have important consequences for their actions. Swick (2004) argued similarly one of the characteristics of an authentic helping relationship is that it is intentional and therefore can be expected, as well as it being respectful and mutually rewarding. As a consequence of more limited social opportunities to build networks in their centres teacher-led mothers had to be much more self-reliant than their Playcentre counterparts. At the same time, independent arrangements favoured those who made friends more easily and were already attached to a social group. Consequently positive social outcomes under these circumstances are more attributable to mothers' ingenuity than to facilities in their centres. It is logical to suppose that as a result, these mothers may in fact see little connection between personal support and their centre, believing instead that support is entirely the consequence of their effort. This narrow concept of the support process was suggested by research conducted by Renwick (1989) who found similarly, that mothers only had expectations

of child-focused goals in kindergartens, leading them to believe they did not gain support from teachers, either emotionally or otherwise.

6.2.1   Initial disempowerment for mothers

Whilst mothers actively pursued socially driven agenda, their first encounter with potential social networks was initially confusing and took time to resolve. Bartlett (2001) confirmed the need of mothers to first make sense of an initial chaos when they walk into an early childhood centre for the first time. This is because all communities have internal structures that are not immediately visible to outsiders and decoding them takes time. In the study, after the first sense of euphoria at having enrolled in a centre mothers experienced a period of let-down and enforced inactivity because they were not immediately sure of how to contribute. As this represented a complete contrast to their recent high activity levels in selecting a centre it must be imagined that this period of disempowerment was very stressful to them. At the same time it appeared that confidence gained through the success of enrolment provided considerable impetus to support them over this period, providing their induction and the subsequent development of friendship, was not too prolonged. In addition, mothers' sense of wellbeing and support was enhanced by equal responsiveness, in all centres, by staff provision of warm welcoming environments. Powell et al. (2005) likewise documented the importance of a nurturing atmosphere. It was particularly evident in the Playcentre where it operated in due proportion to centre needs for mothers to assume responsibility. Notably, where mothers' contribution was not required to the same degree in the teacher-led services less attention was paid to mothers being quickly inducted into the centre operation. Consequently whilst mothers in these groups experienced a warm welcome, they took much longer finding their way that translated into a reduced period of support. These findings were supported by Farquhar (2005) who argued mothers found the period of induction a time of reduced confidence in a low status role.

The length of time mothers took to feel comfortable in centre routines and begin to build relationships with their peers varied considerably. An important finding was that some mothers were much more in need of staff intervention in any case, in order to fulfil their support needs, testifying to the need for individual requirements. As a marker of this early stage of membership was an inevitable lack of social connection with their peers mothers' only opportunity for support was interaction with staff. However, because the child focus meant teachers' efforts were always directed towards children's needs the time they spent with mothers operated over a prescribed time. As a consequence whilst mothers gained support through staff interaction with their child, once he or she was settled, teachers withdrew irrespective of the status of the mother's requirements. This suggested that centre attention for mothers was based upon expectations of conformity rather than individual requirements, that Churchill (2003) argued are indivisible from support. Not only this, it suggested that mothers with a lesser capacity for gaining support may have their vulnerable position reinforced. This was borne out in the study where some mothers reported feeling let down by teachers at this point, as well as some mothers spending extended periods of time in isolation when their child did not settle. Diener et al. (1999) believed such circumstances have implications because an individual's particular capacity for success in making personal adaptations predicts how well they cope with their lives.

6.3 Proposition 2: Support is conditional upon the development of relationships of trust at different levels within the centre community.

Whatever the experiences encountered by mothers, most negotiated the induction period with a growing sense of confidence and connection to their community. Bartlett (2001) believed transition is effected as a result of increased attunement. Apart from this once mothers began to intermingle with their peers they no longer relied so much on interacting with teachers. Whilst it was a process, staff were the catalysts for precipitating this change by formally introducing mothers to the rest of the community, but at the same time withdrawing their own intense involvement. The induction period

when mothers interacted primarily with staff and learned the basic culture of the centre represented the first phase of membership. The second phase began when mothers were able to focus on pursuing social connections with their peers. These relationships formed the basis of friendship with all the advantages of equal status, empathy with same stage interests and the exchange of pertinent information. There is considerable evidence in the literature for the significance of relationships as the basis of support. In the study conducted by Duncan, Bowden and Smith (2005) that set out to examine the degree to which early childhood centres were perceived to have supported the development of family resilience, there was overwhelming evidence that positive, trusting, stable relationships are the main underpinning of coping in families. Thoits (1985) found degrees of resilience occurred through the transference of emotional and informational resources between individuals. The author emphasised the importance of relationships being recognised beyond channels of communication alone, as they constitute the greatest single most effective coping function for mothers in their family role. Stevens (1988) argued it has a particular application for mothers as they attempt to fulfil the demands of a new role that is continually developing.

6.3.1   Initial professional relationships with staff

It has been argued that in the current study the first relationships all mothers forged were with staff. These were pre-empted when mothers perceived a compatibility with them as the main criterion for centre selection. However, whilst these relationships developed within a warm, friendly atmosphere they remained detached and professional within the teacher-led groups. Although this indicated a power differential, initially it was found to be useful in facilitating mothers when they felt most vulnerable. It was also helpful that staff spent a great deal of time with mothers during the enrolment period. Sheldon (2002) believed this served a purpose because it was useful in acquainting mothers with teachers' range of expertise as well as its particular educational emphasis. Allan and Schultz (1988) not only reported similar findings but also suggested that it served a purpose because it was tantamount to "borrowing" the confidence of staff when they

themselves did not have much. The authors were in fact convinced that the vulnerability displayed by mothers was actually purposeful as a catalyst for support.

Although in the study relationships were always detached between teachers and mothers in the teacher-led centres they had a more intense quality initially, reflecting teachers' engagement with the child that inevitably included the mother. Dalli (1997) advocated these dual support opportunities as important because they are not only meaningful for mothers and children but also efficient for teachers. In the study the teachers' focus was also seen to have the effect of showcasing the new mother and child to the community at a time when social connections needed to be initiated. Teachers were aware it was important to connect mothers with their peers both for the satisfaction derived from these relationships, as well as because their own responsibilities prevented them from focusing such sustained levels of attention on one mother indefinitely. Formal introductions to the group were important because they acted as a "trigger" that was the impetus for mothers' transition from support that was almost exclusively derived from teachers, to it being accessed from the entire community. This was a time when support was most effective because of the good fit between mothers' needs and teachers' actions. It also identified teachers as perpetrators of an important effect in support terms by the way they anticipated mothers' actions and were able to help them take a first step towards achieving their aims. However, teachers attached little weight to their skill in this regard because the informal nature of the transaction rendered it inconsequential as far as teachers were concerned.

Mothers' response to the transition from staff to peer relationships varied according to their social competency and degree of confidence. Some felt let down and even bereft when intense support was withdrawn. Having enjoyed the heightened attention of staff associated with the induction period of membership they were now required to move out of the only recently acquired comfort zone and make the shift to building relationships with their peers. However, for most mothers although this presented an initial challenge the outcome represented a cornucopia of opportunities for gaining the most productive support available within the membership. McGuire and Gottleib (1979) attached the

same importance to peer relationships because their shared status has potential for empathetic close support. In the current study once the shift to socialising with peers had occurred, relationships with teachers (in teacher-led services) continued to operate on a professional basis. Shartrand et al. (1994) likewise reported detached relationships between teachers and parents citing a very low incidence of routine daily interaction in kindergartens. In a similar study by Hughes and MacNaughton (1999b) the authors argued conversations were frequently even so brief that they often did not involve the exchange of any meaningful information.

Mothers' relationship building with their peers coincided with a growing confidence as contributing members of the centre. They were increasingly reinforced by the success of these friendships and the general informational exchange that affirmed them both as mothers and women. These findings concur with those of Allan and Schultz (1988) and Cochran et al. (1990) who argued the process of support entails social rituals that require an initial confidence. Once connections begin to develop they are then reinforced for individuals by the sense of being held in high esteem by others. Through repeated exchanges a self-efficacy is promoted that engenders action towards eliminating stressful circumstances as well as adjusting to things that are unchangeable. In pursuing friendship mothers in the study met with varying degrees of success. Outcomes were attributable to the intersection of their own individual capacities and the centre response, of which the latter compiled structural as well as teacher influences. However, there was considerable evidence of mothers demonstrating opportunistic behaviour by the way they showed active resourcefulness in achieving a high degree of success within processes that favoured child-focused programmes rather than the social needs of adults. Wenger (1999) affirmed mothers are frequently hampered by centres where practices are shaped by conditions outside the control of its members. However the active and particular response to the conditions actually operates to make the outcomes peculiarly their own enterprise.

6.3.2 Peer relationships and intimate support

Mothers' transition from being reliant on staff to building relationships with their peers was pivotal because of the particular quality of support these connections were able to deliver. Not only were they able to provide intimate emotional support that Cochran et al. (1990) argued is only possible through shared status but also they represented access to a spectrum of knowledge that went beyond the narrow educational focus that teachers promoted in the teacher-led servcies. In addition whilst teacher-mother relationships were transient, those with their peers had greater potential for becoming more permanent additions to personal networks after membership was over. However, whilst these special relationships were much sought after, mothers first had to become acquainted with a range of potential candidates and this all took time. McKim (1987) confirmed the temporal period as normal because the processes involved are a lot more complex, than ordinarily believed. This is of particular consequence because simultaneously mothers are grappling with a challenging life stage rendering this a time of unprecedented conflict. Apart from finding relationships that work, mothers are also making decisions about radical change that makes them uncertain about which individuals to retain from previous networks as well as how to work with new, unfamiliar relationships. There was evidence in the study that many of these dilemmas began to be resolved once mothers identified with their peers and began to share common interests. It was at this time that group relationships were initiated that formed the basis of ongoing support.

Apart from difficulties with intimate friendships taking time to develop some mothers were much more able to initiate them than others. Diener et al. (1999) also found it to be typical that friendship making is a lengthy process, as well as reporting network size is also highly individual. Not only does this suggest mothers have a wide spectrum of needs, but also a variable capacity to satisfy them, emphasising the unique nature of support. Churchill (2003) confirmed this view, believing that staff were unable to facilitate effective support outside working with parents on an individual basis. In the study most mothers not only enjoyed the emotional satisfaction of personal relationships but were also able to capitalise on a wide range of different types of support. Mothers

who were less successful were limited to peripheral support that still amounted to useful exchanges of information, but did not extend to emotional or practical help. In terms of mothers who had more difficulty finding special friends this was usually due to a lesser capacity for initiating relationships or a personal style that indicated a preference for one or two close relationships. Walker and Riley (2001) confirmed individuals demonstrate different capacities in friendship building, believing some *require small more intimate relationships*, as opposed to *larger looser relationships*. In the study, implications were that the small, intimate relationship style requires much more responsiveness to be invested in single individuals, than is necessary when it can be accommodated in the combined attributes of a larger loose group. As a consequence, a much wider field of acquaintanceship is required for these small network individuals, in order to provide them with enough choice to establish a compatible relationship. Whilst this suggested that small network style mothers would fare better in the kindergartens because of their larger rolls, this was not the case. Not only were there limited opportunities to meet in the kindergartens, that offset the advantage of higher rolls, but also mothers only had opportunities to meet mothers who attended their particular sessions.

One of the groups of mothers that caused most concern with relationship building was that of the migrant mothers. Before they were able to interact successfully socially they had to overcome barriers associated with making a personal adjustment to the mainstream language and culture. At the same time they were also hampered with concerns for their children who were encountering similar problems, something that was also reported in a study by Terreni (2003). D.Powell (1998) argued relationships are always less satisfactory where there are language barriers. He attributed this to limits placed on communication and reciprocity because potential relationship partners do not pick up on cues and follow expected social norms. As a result of these difficulties migrant mothers in the study existed in a consistent state of low confidence that erected barriers to friendship that were further exacerbated by the lack of opportunities to meet. Ritchie (2001) found a similar reaction by immigrants and recommended staff need to be alert to the different cultural world views of the families with which they work, not only

to welcome them but also in order to support them to make successful social adjustments.

Although all mothers sought the type of relationships that developed into close friendships that produced the ultimate in support, even when this did not occur there were still advantages associated with more casual relationships. D. Powell (1998) similarly, confirmed the usefulness of peripheral connections or the chance meetings with all members as serving an important networking purpose, determining that relationships do not have to be intimate to be effective. In the present study mothers who either found it difficult to build relationships as well as those who preferred detached social connections were still able to benefit from the reservoir of peripheral knowledge represented within the community through low commitment connections. There was also evidence that these did not just exist within the bounds of the centre, but extended into the community as well as beyond the period of engagement with the centre. Cochran et al. (1990) described these relationships as remaining on the periphery of a network until potential usefulness activates them. Relationships as the catalyst of support were the most important aspect of mothers' benefits. The different types of possible relationships meant there was potential access to a very wide range of support so that most mothers were accommodated.

6.4 Proposition 3: Effective early childhood communities are responsive to the changing needs of mothers.

The major characteristic of mothers' support requirements was that they were ever changing. Braun (1992) argued similarly that mothers' needs are never static and this is taken care of by their own active engagement that is uniquely tailored to support them because they identify their own requirements. In the present study mothers' responsiveness was illustrated by the way they initiated and selected a compatible early childhood service and then set out to build relationships of support and gain confidence through contribution in the centre. An important way mothers progressed through the

centre was through active building of group affiliations within a very short time of belonging to the centre. Identified as the major source of support for mothers' ever changing needs, group relationships illustrated the active role mothers took in their own support. Group relationships not only met child-driven parenting needs, but also anticipated the development of more individual friendships later. Galinsky (1980) argued the same principles believing parents' development is shaped by interaction with their children to the degree that the child's development leads parents from stage-to-stage. The same-stage cohorts began to develop as soon as mothers enrolled. By talking to each other they quickly deciphered the prevailing social patterns in the centre and worked out which mothers were grappling with the same type of problems. McGuire and Gottleib (1979) advocated the importance of these peer relationships because of the mutuality generated through sharing the same life stage issues. In the study the cohorts maintained an association throughout membership. They served individual needs through frequent exchanges of information that was of particular interest to the group recognising that other parents within the extended community were operating at different stages of parenting and growth. Lave and Wenger (1991) similarly identified mothers' membership of early childhood centres as cyclical, describing a developmental progression from novice to expert.

Whilst some mothers were more successful in relating to these same-stage groups than others, for mothers with a personal preference for detached relationships they still represented support opportunities because of their low commitment. Cochran et al. (1990) believed it was an important characteristic of same-stage cohorts that they were able to encompass diverse needs. At the same time they had the capacity to provide consistent support, so that when individual members are temporarily absent, there is no loss of support because others are always able to substitute. According to Walker and Riley (2001) the positioning of mothers in smaller denser networks with a higher degree of interrelationship, ensures they experience less loneliness and more sense of community before they want, or are able to service individual relationships.

Same-stage cohorts of mothers initially formed when new mothers encountered others who had also just joined the centre. Here, some mothers were clearly advantaged when they enrolled along with an already intact group of friends, usually as a legacy of an ante-natal or Plunket coffee group. Despite the same-stage friendship groups being initially easy to join, this was only for a relatively short timeframe, suggesting a critical period. Once a cohort was established, it moved on and because the group interest had already progressed from induction, separation and other early aspects of centre membership there was no requirement to include new members still operating at this level. However, whilst this worked optimally for most mothers, there were consequences for those mothers who for some reason, usually pre-occupation with their child, were unable to focus on their own needs, and identify with the particular cohort of mothers who had joined the centre at the same time. These mothers inevitably became isolated. Dalli (1997) argued similarly, believing isolation was characteristic of this complex time when mothers' attitudes continually fluctuate between being a mother and being their own person, something that is only resolved over time. In the study, mothers who found themselves in this position were doubly at risk, because the critical period for joining a cohort coincided with the withdrawal of intensive individual support by teachers that was only associated with the time of enrolment.

As a result of cohort support mothers became more confident in their parenting and increasingly able to contribute to their early childhood centre. Also, during this transition their own needs began gradually to be re-asserted, coinciding with the growing independence of their child. It established a stage of progression where mothers embarked upon more individual friendships with members of their cohort who had mutual adult interests. Although this signalled a time of more independent relationships the cohorts still remained latent. They resurfaced again when increased support needed to be activated during times of change, notably the transition to school. Mothers who operated in isolation from the same stage groups had less access to ongoing support and were identified instead as more prolific users of peripheral support. However, according to Stokes (1985) even peripheral membership of these cohorts for less socially successful mothers, or those who have a preference for detached relationships cannot be

underestimated. The cohort value lies in bringing mothers into close proximity with extroverts, and in so doing exposes them to the benefits of the larger networks of the latter.

6.5   Summary

Mothers gained support from their early childhood centres through actively building relationships first with teachers and then with parents. In order to do this they were reliant upon a favourable response from their centre. Mothers' responses varied according to the impact of service structures and teacher's attitudes. The latter determined the degree to which mothers were able to serve their own purposes through shared decision making and all were translated into expectations through the culture of the centre. However, irrespective of their centres' responses mothers showed themselves to be opportunists in building relationships and making a contribution to centre environments that were usually set up for the benefit of children rather than meeting the needs of adults.

All mothers showed adherence to the same pattern of gaining membership of an early childhood centre. They made a socially driven selection that was close to home and therefore timesaving for easy servicing of new relationships. The satisfaction mothers gained through achieving this goal provided an important impetus during the first period of adjustment to the centre. Membership was established on the criterion of a perceived compatibility with teachers, then later upon developing relationships with other parents. Teachers were particularly responsive to mothers' needs in the initial stages of membership. They provided warm nurturing environments for the initiation of relationships as well as introductions to the rest of the community. Teachers' knowledge of the cyclical nature of the centre made them sensitive to mothers' requirements that were the catalyst for mothers to initiate peer relationships at the time teachers withdrew initial, individual support. At the same time, teachers' relationships with mothers

remained friendly, but professional, as well as providing a valuable educational resource throughout membership.

Once mothers' relationships developed with their peers they were not only instrumental in opening up a wide spectrum of support, but their equal status was responsible for the most satisfying social exchange that held the most potential for inclusion in more permanent personal networks. Group relationship building was an important aspect of mothers' active, low commitment provision for needs that were child driven and ever changing. Affiliations developed between mothers who enrolled and then moved through the different stages of motherhood together, sharing and processing the particular areas of information significant for their group. In the final stage of development (that was characterised by mothers' own needs being reasserted as their child gained independence) the cohorts became relationship pools from which mothers selected personal friendships on the basis of mutual interests.

The way in which mothers demonstrated their pro-active capacity for gaining support through the catalysts of relationships is summarised in figure 3. It shows how mothers all enrolled in their early childhood centre upon the same basis: a socially driven selection that engaged them with a compatible community. A period of inactivity and therefore low levels of support followed as mothers learned how to contribute within the unique culture of their centre. During this period there was heavy reliance on staff relationships as mothers settled into the routines with their child. At this stage, figure 3 shows a divergence between mothers who demonstrated different capacities for relationship building. For most mothers the next period heralded the development of a range of supportive relationships, some of which were added to more permanent networks, transcending the early childhood setting. A minority of mothers who lacked fulfilment in building anticipated friendships left their centre and continued to search for compatible relationships elsewhere. Notable, is peripheral support that is available to all mothers irrespective of the status of their relationship building, establishing early childhood centres as important support networks for all mothers.

Figure 3: Mothers' active relationship building determined a range of ongoing support

RELIANCE ON TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS	TRANSITION TO RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

Low support during induction period of membership

Increased support activity in contributing membership

Relationships develop into more permanent personal networks

Relationships Personalise, become individual and independent

Peripheral Support

Mothers' socially driven selection of a centre from local area

Mothers engage with centre through relationships with teachers	Mothers rely less on teachers as they build relationships with other same stage cohorts	Mothers are confident contributing members of community	Some mothers assume high commitment roles in community	Support for transition to school with child
Some mothers do not readily engage with centre through relationships	Some mothers are pre-occupied with their child and miss building initial, critical group relationships	Some mothers isolated, lack confidence make minimal contribution	Some mothers continue with low levels of commitment and support	Mothers transition with their child to school

Some mothers leave and become transient with their child

Peripheral Support

Chapter six concludes having discussed the pro-active nature of mothers' quest for support through relationship building. Now chapter seven continues with a discussion focused on the secondary source of data, staff information that shows the responses made to mothers' support needs by the different capacities of the early childhood centres in the study. Chapter seven ends with a discussion concerning focus group verification.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS:
Formal and informal systems of support (Propositions 4-6)

7.1   Introduction

The three propositions in the previous chapter incorporated the idea that mothers in the study were active participants in their own support through the catalyst of the relationships they established within their centres. However, this was still contingent upon the opportunities centres provided for them to engage in social activities and contribute to their particular early childhood community. In this the four centres did not represent uniformity. However, the complexity of the variables made it inappropriate to consider the centres on any continuum of quality in terms of support, neither was this the intention. The staff interpretation of the service structures they represented meant there was a perceived difference between teacher-led centres and the parent-led centre in terms of mothers' ability to contribute in decision-making roles. In turn this determined the degree of control they were able to exert over their centre environment in order for it to be responsive to their particular needs. However, despite other differences, all centres operated on the basis of both formal and informal systems of support. The formal system equated with intentional planned delivery, whilst the informal system consisted of social exchange of the minutiae of everyday life between all members of the community. K.Powell (2005) documented the high value placed upon the latter for the opportunities it promoted to gain parenting information within informal learning contexts where mothers both interacted with and observed the early childhood community in action.

The dual response made to mothers' support needs in the early childhood centres in the study, through both formal and informal systems constitutes the second theme in the study and is the subject of chapter seven. The systems operated according to principles described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) that conceptualise the environment as nested

structures each inside the next that continually interact with each other to have impact on developmental outcomes that are also flexible over time. Later in the chapter a verification of the researcher's interpretation of the findings through two focus groups is documented and discussed. The chapter concludes with a summary that includes figure 4 that shows how the dual formal and informal systems operated. The discussion in chapter seven is conducted through the three final propositions as follows:

Proposition 4: Staff beliefs about their role as well as the centre structure are major determinants of the degree to which formal support is promoted.

Proposition 5: Formal support involves planned delivery of information including parent education; informal support involves the exchange of everyday incidental information through social networks.

Proposition 6: Lack of power sharing by teachers reduces the effectiveness of centres as communities of learning.

7.2   Proposition 4: Staff beliefs about their role as well as the centre structure are major determinants of the degree to which formal support is promoted

The particular support responses made by the different centres were determined by teachers' interpretation of centre structures. Whalley (2002) argued likewise, that staff beliefs about parents undoubtedly affect their work and social outcomes in centres. In the present study the most significant aspect of this was that teachers' attitudes to the authority of their role meant they did not share power with parents. As a consequence mothers in the teacher-led groups did not have the same self-determination through joint decision making that was experienced by those in the parent-led Playcentre. The implication was that as support was contingent upon mothers taking a pro-active role, those in the teacher-led centres needed to be much more creative to gain advantages in

these less collaborative environments. Invariably, this meant the most resourceful mothers had the most success in gaining support.

There were complex reasons why teachers held to the non-collaborative leadership that drove their formal programmes. Firstly, they had very highly developed ideas about their position being qualitatively different from parents because of their trained employed positions. D. Powell (1997a) believed these attitudes were a result of hard won professional status and the emphasis on training. The beliefs teachers held about professional infallibility inevitably contrasted their trained, with parents' lay knowledge, that gave them reservations about its inclusion in decision making, lest it jeopardise their programmes. Hughes and McNaughton (1999b) in a review of early childhood literature found similarly that teachers placed low value on parent involvement, with parent knowledge presented as "inadequate misguided or just plain wrong" (p.13). The authors believed teachers gave little credence to parents' non-professional, non-scientific, subjective, personalised and emotional understandings of their children because it was the complete antithesis of the early childhood profession's creed. Likewise in a more recent study, Duncan et al. (2004) reported the same reluctance to concede the usefulness of interpersonal exchange. Katz (1995) attested to the influences on teachers being so overriding they even prevented them from looking beyond the supposed quality of the different knowledge bases, to recognising that mothers' needs encompass far greater scope than just educationally based knowledge. According to File (2001) apart from teachers' attitudes being commonplace, the real concern is that during the time the early childhood field has built its identity as a profession, this has actually served to increase the distance between mothers and teachers, reducing collaborative practices even further. Disturbingly, rather than this being just an incidental effect, File attributed it to deliberate action. The author believed, not unexpectedly, that teachers have actively worked at detaching themselves from being perceived as "just doing mothers' work", to espousing professional models. Consequently whilst teacher training has introduced quality practices, these have been traditionally orientated towards the exercise of expert knowledge. In the present study these same attitudes were consequential to teachers deliberately containing lay information and dismissing it as "idle conversation," that was

responsible for de-valuing authentic knowledge, as well as its suppression. Not only was congregation discouraged by the unavailability of parent space, but also planned social functions were low priority.

Apart from the measures taken in centres that were responsible for reducing mothers' most effective support resource; everyday exchange, they also emphasised the lack of congruency between teachers' and mothers' views of support. Schumaker and Brownell (1984) inferred this was not unusual because of the diffuse nature of support particularly when there are different perspectives. However, it had implications in the study because limited communication between teachers and mothers resulted in the lack of a forum for mothers. As a consequence teachers were never exposed to alternative views so that there was no impetus for change. As well as this being a disempowering experience for mothers it confirmed their expectations that decision-making was the prerogative of teachers. Burge (1999) argued similarly that individuals' expectations decide their motivation. In the study when there were situations where mothers continually lacked self-determination they retreated to a position where they could exercise greater control and function more easily, notably within informal exchange. Sheldon (2002) explained the reason for this resides in motivation to engage in activities being accompanied by personal investment, where an individual believes they can be successful. In the current study apart from resorting to complaints' procedures, no formal ways existed for mothers to redress situations in these centres. The only way was to persuade other members of the community to espouse similar opposing views or act independently. Not only did mothers have to be very confident to take this course of action, there was little hope of success in persuading others to associate with anything they thought might court teacher disfavour and impact on their child. As a result there was limited opportunity for any change to occur through mothers' instigation alone. Consequently the low levels of communication between teachers and mothers perpetuated an apparent acquiessence that continued to reinforce staff beliefs that mothers were happy for teachers to be the decision makers. These same issues were not apparent in the Playcentre because there staff responded as mothers.

7.3 Proposition 5: Formal support involves planned delivery of information including parent education; informal support involves the exchange of everyday incidental information through social networks

As relationships were the catalysts of support the social structures in centres had considerable influence over benefit outcomes. Whilst the different status of teachers and mothers in teacher-led communities resulted in more complex systems, all centres reflected opportunities for different levels of support. In the main these have been identified as formal and informal social systems that operated in all centres irrespective of their leadership. In the way of Bronfenbrenners' systems theory they were highly interrelated, to the degree that it was difficult to distinguish where they intersected and it is probable that they were dynamic over time. The systems represented an extension of the family microsystem into the mesosystem Bronfenbrenner's second level of sociql connection in which both mothers and staff were involved. The centre systems were likewise nested within the exosystem (the third level of social context) where health and welfare services were accessed and particularly in the case of the Playcentre support was extended into the neighbourhood. The formal system consisted of the actions of staff as they interpreted the service intent, incorporating formal transactions between staff and members. The informal system was not bounded and occurred naturally as a result of everyday social exchange of the minutiae of life, even extending into the community. Both systems operated interchangeably in all centres and identified support as a reciprocal responsibility within the whole community, rather than being a commodity offered by staff to mothers. As mothers were actively involved in gaining their own support they operated in both systems. However, it was evident they gained the most effective support from the informal system. Not only did this amount to the exchange of widely focused authentic information and empathy between social equals, but it allowed self-determination. The major advantage of the informal systems was they operated in the currency of everyday conversation. Effective support as the outcome of informal exchanges was also documented separately by Smith et al. (2000) and Duncan et al. (2004).

It has been argued that mothers' support needs in the study were met through the dual response of both formal and informal social systems that reflected both intentional and unintentional provision. As both these systems were reciprocal to mothers' active participation, the effectiveness of centre support was directly related to the degree to which the different services operated as catalysts for this to occur. The two major components for mothers to experience effective support were, the degree to which centres facilitated the building and maintaining of successful relationships, and encouraged mothers' contribution. However, rather than these operations just being the result of arbitrary decisions by staff, they were heavily influenced by the different service structures. Dalli (1997) argued similarly, centre structures are the major determinants of what happens within the service. Consequently, although staff represented the leadership in centres they were themselves constrained by non-negotiable aspects of the different service types. However, it was always their interpretation of them that underpinned the decision-making in the formal systems. At the same time in the teacher-led centres a lack of collaborative principles meant mothers had little influence, so that formal support always reflected teachers' educational focus and preferred currencies of transmission.

7.3.1   Teachers' formal parent information deliveries

In the study teacher leadership was identified by an educational focus and a reluctance to accept lay information that engendered beliefs that the best way to support mothers was through parent education. However, because of teachers' traditional view of adult learning parent education was translated into a deficit model. The formal approach teachers used neither included parent consultation regarding topics and organisation, nor deliveries based upon socio-cultural learning principles. Consequently the formal approach placed mothers in passive recipient roles that directly compromised their need for active self-determination, in order to make support gains. Bandura (1977) early cautioned against a weak type of delivery that only employs the methodology of verbal persuasion and creates expectations without providing an authentic experiential base for

them. Likewise, Wenger (1999) believed learning cannot be designed, but should be understood as part of experience and practice negotiated together. However, according to Wenger instead of this being a normal occurrence in centres, deficit approaches are widespread, being commensurate with traditional values related to adult education whereby social relationships and interests are mistrusted. Here the goal instead, is to prepare students for a particular purpose rather than allow them to explore possibilities for further capacities. Swick (1992) believed above everything the traditional view of knowledge exchange does not reflect partnership principles that must be related to the needs of the parents to be acceptable. In teacher-led centres in the study parent education amounted to one or two seminars annually. These were received with disfavour by mothers, who having few other routes to express their views about ineffectual support, indicated their lack of interest in the formal education teachers provided by poor attendance.

In the present study despite disappointment at mothers' response teachers were not prompted to make changes. Apart from the ongoing lack of communication, teachers' sense of professional infallibility attributed mothers' lack of interest to poor discernment, rather than anything erring in their own practices. Teachers believed instead, mothers were unable to appreciate the value of the sessions, further reinforcing their views regarding the inadequacies of parent knowledge. Hughes and McNaughton (2000) argued similarly, that professional knowledge, practices and voices traditionally prevail against those of lay parents, because the weight of that opinion is opposed to parents who are in a subordinate and passive position. It should also be said that in the study it was not difficult for teachers to believe there were reasons other than the deficit model that determined mothers' lack of interest. These resided in the many other legitimate reasons for not attending such as: tiredness, lack of time, babysitters or transport. As well, teachers' rationale was further reinforced by the marginally increased interest mothers demonstrated in the parent education sessions as they progressed to committee membership. Instead of teachers attributing this result to mothers having greater involvement in decision making and topic choice, they believed it to be the result

of their efforts to impart a better appreciation of teachers' knowledge to mothers over time.

Apart from teachers' conviction that their formal parent education model constituted the best professional delivery, they also found it convenient. In a climate of uncertainty as to their role with parents and how to perform it, parent education sessions represented a "concrete delivery" where teachers as educators experienced real confidence, much more than they did around the more abstract ideas concerning support. As well, because teachers viewed parent education as a separate entity, they were concerned it took them away from their child-focused workload for which they were trained. Therefore, by compartmentalising parent support as parent education packages teachers only had to consider it occasionally rather than on a daily basis. Mitchell (2003) argued similarly that teachers are temporally constrained, not having generous amounts of non-contact time. Underpinning all these reasons for maintaining their present programme with parents was that it fitted well with teachers' definition of support as a commodity. As a consequence, teachers believed mothers had a passive rather than an active role in gaining support, so they did not equate their low levels of socially co-operative practices with reducing benefits.

7.3.2   Limited communication and reduced support

Whilst it was not unexpected that teachers' and mothers' views of support would be discrepant, given their different perspectives, it was an issue because it instigated a mismatch between mothers' needs and teachers' provision. Mitchell (2003), as well as Davidson and Tolich (2003) found similar discrepancies between the support expectations of teachers and mothers, with Davidson and Tolich believing tensions were inevitable if they went unresolved. The authors' concerns were reflected in the present study where incongruence persisted because of the lack of shared ideas between teachers and mothers at a meaningful level. As a consequence, the flow of information in teacher-led centres was reduced to a one-way system of directives and advice,

(frequently in writing) from teachers. Such a system, where mothers were always recipients of information, rather than being involved in its generation, meant they were not in a position to give feedback. White (2005) argued this feedback is a necessary pre-cursor of action and a requirement for moving a learner to a new level. In the present study teachers persisted with non-collaborative systems because on the occasions when they did consult with mothers they gained a limited response. Teachers found it easy to believe that mothers were not interested in being involved, preferring teachers to take the decisions, that further affirmed their practices. However, they did not consider that mothers acted this way because of the unexpected nature of infrequent requests for their opinions. Wenger (1999) reported similar findings believing excuses are always easily found to confine power to one group. Exclusion from decision making through low levels of social co-operation was not only dis-empowering for mothers, but also had consequences for generation of support that relied upon their active contribution. It was also stultifying because of the importance information held for mothers. Stevens (1988) argued similarly information is more important than any other type of support, with social emotional values having much less weight. Stevens believed this was because of the overriding need of mothers to meet the demands of effective child rearing that requires them to adjust their socialisation to a context that meets both these goals. Hughes and MacNaughton (1999a) believed likewise, arguing just about everything that happens in an early childhood setting consists of one sort of communication or another.

The impact of limited social co-operation in the study was not only reflected in unshared views between teachers' and mothers' that resulted in different knowledge bases being present in the centres. As teachers were the authority their narrow educational emphasis took precedence over mothers' need for a much wider spectrum of information. Katz (1995) likewise argued these opposing values by teachers and mothers, with File (2001) believing they were responsible for far-reaching and detrimental effects on relationships with inevitable consequences for support.

One of the underpinnings of the detached communication in teacher-led centres was transmission of knowledge through written text. It included material distributed at

enrolment, during parent education seminars, on noticeboards and in newsletters and questionnaires. Teachers believed written communication constituted a professional delivery as well as reinforcing the detached relationships appropriate with parents. Hughes and McNaughton (1999b) argued likewise that teachers are continually motivated to want parents to recognise that their decisions are based on trained knowledge as well as information being much more emphatic when committed to print. In the study written transmission of information constituted ineffectual support. This was not only because of the overwhelming amount of material, but because of the lack of opportunity for processing through general discussion. McKim (1987) found similarly, that written information is vague and does not suggest solutions, with one of the biggest issues being it does not address parents' immediate problems. In the study this was exemplified by the way information being teacher-generated, was couched in teacher currency, making it unresponsive to mothers' requirement for spontaneous, authentic knowledge. Hughes and McNaughton also believed written material is alien to mothers seeking authentic information because it is open to interpretation and teachers' high usage reflects a lack of understanding of their requirements. Whilst the usefulness of written language is indisputable, particularly for reference purposes, it loses its effectiveness when used as an exclusive method of communication.

Apart from the predominant use of written information being ineffectual as the major communication between teachers and mothers it also served to reinforce a group view of mothers that was not helpful in identifying their individual needs. Churchill (2003) argued that without specific knowledge of individual mothers' needs and the reciprocity it evokes there is little basis for good support. In the study individual verbal exchange within the formal centre systems was confined to only very specific aspects of centre life. Whilst it was initially a feature of staff-mother relationships at enrolment it then receded unless mothers became committee members.

The management committee represented the closest proximity to collaborative relationships in the teacher-led centres and demonstrated that teachers were well able to facilitate socially co-operative enterprises. The main reason for improved socially co-

operative practices in this regard, was the changed relationship between teachers and mothers, that was the pivotal factor in support. There were several reasons why this occurred at committee level. Increased individual knowledge about each other in a smaller group and teachers' recognition of the personal attributes and expertise of senior mothers generated more social equity. At the same time mothers' involvement on the committee was a necessary part of the centre function. Where centre or child needs were concerned teachers were not only more motivated towards co-operation, but they also had expectations that parents would be involved in the decision making processes. Hughes and McNaughton (1999b) reported similarly that there was evidence of teachers showing willingness to collaborate with mothers where they fitted into the framework of the centre programme.

Accordingly, teachers had increased confidence within these new relationships that was responsible for them being more sensitive to mothers' needs and consequently more responsive to their support. Smith et al. (2000) when exploring similar relationships between teachers and mothers advocated increased sensitivity to parents' needs as the precursor to satisfying them. In the study a better knowledge of mothers' needs motivated teachers to give more attention to mother and child that was reinforcing to mothers, who in return approached teachers more frequently. Not only did this allow mothers to take advantage of teachers' expertise on more regular occasions but also they were able to do it in a pro-active way that better met their requirements for self-determination. As a consequence of these experiences mothers had increased self-confidence and social status within the group. It also showed that irrespective of teachers' beliefs about the nature of support, they were still able to be responsive to mothers. However, it was unfortunate that committee membership applied only to a minority of mothers. For the majority of mothers discussions with teachers on a regular basis were very limited, a finding that was also reported in research by Hughes and McNaughton (2000).

Communication issues in centres were acknowledged by both teachers and mothers, but only teachers were in a position to initiate change. Smith et al. (2000) argued similarly

that change in centres is always contingent upon teachers taking the initiative because of the authority of their role. However, study teachers were reluctant to address communication problems because of the implications it had for reducing their power that allowed them to maintain social control. In this teachers were not entirely autonomous because of legislated obligations to build partnerships with parents. They were both goaded and guided by Te Whaariki and other Ministry of Education documents to which they had a serious commitment. All teachers were fully trained (except one who was completing her training) and in one centre at least, teachers had taken professional development courses with this focus. However, within-centre discussion on how to work with parents was sparse and the parent education sessions were frequently only the domain of the head teacher. As a consequence this served to reinforce (particularly to younger teachers) that parent education and support was a low priority. Farquhar (1991) argued similarly whilst most other aspects of early childhood education have been repeatedly scrutinised, discussion regarding parent partnerships has rarely been a focus.

In the present study whilst teachers made efforts towards improving communication with mothers their success was limited because they only used methods that maintained their power base. Motivation was directed towards gaining insights that would further consolidate their position rather than encouraging shared decision making with the community. Consequently whilst teachers reinforced their authority and child-focused role this also served to reduce interactions with mothers that they found a perplexing and difficult aspect of their role. Katz (1987) likewise reported teacher relationships with parents as always problematic believing the fact that support is contingent upon relationships makes the whole process very complex. It is one that is not easily resolved because teachers find relationships with parents potentially one of the greatest sources of stress they experience in their work. The lack of social co-operation in the study had implications for not only denying mothers the empowerment of responsibility but also reducing teachers' effectiveness, because it denied them insights into how to work with mothers. Konzal (2000) believed this was typical of the relationships between teachers

and mothers and the invariable lack of success pointed to a need for changes to be made in favour of systems that instead promote collaboration and parent empowerment.

7.3.3 Non-transference of child learning principles to adults

Teachers' low responsiveness to parents as contributing partners in centres cannot be entirely attributed to their status beliefs. Rather they were unsure of their role with parents. This was consequential to a lack of the necessary training and skills to implement more socially co-operative systems, even if better communication had exposed them to alternative views. As teachers were effective in their relationships with children and the ability to provide successful learning experiences, it could have been expected that they would have demonstrated more discernment regarding requirements for adult learning. However, Konzal (2000) argued this lack of understanding is commonplace and despite their prowess with young children teachers resort to traditional views of adult learning. As teachers do not readily apply the learning principles they understand with children to adults, it suggests this is not transferable knowledge. Teachers in the present study demonstrated this by their strong beliefs about mothers being experienced adults and therefore having other needs from children. D. Powell (1989) believed likewise, parents' needs and those of children do not entirely overlap something that should generate impetus for better provision to be made for parents. He argued parents cannot be ignored, because their presence in centres is not incidental and if partnerships are to work, they need to be viable. In the study teachers' view of mothers' educational needs led them to focus on the differences rather than the similarities between mothers and children as learners, rather than on the principles of how learning occurs. As a result teachers had unrealistic expectations of mothers and over-estimated what they were able to achieve unaided, as well as the degree to which it was teachers' responsibility to support this learning process.

Whilst relationships with mothers were a source of stress to teachers, the underlying cause was the uncertainty and frustration about working with them when their training

had not fitted them to do so. Farquhar (1991) likewise, believed there was the need for a solution to find ways of training teachers that would more effectively gain parents' respect and confidence in order for them to successfully fulfil a parent support role. Shartrand et al. (1994) supported this view arguing presently teachers do not have the knowledge necessary for adult provision because formalised programmes that address how early childhood teachers relate to parents and how systems can operate for providing links with home are non-existent.

7.3.4   Formal routines associated with effective support

Despite the importance attached to teachers being better trained to fulfil their role with parents, accomplishing this through the development of standardised training would not only be fraught with difficulty, but also highly undesirable. This is because centres have unique characteristics that need to be retained in order to be responsive to the particular community they serve. Mitchell (2003) argued similarly there are considerable difficulties associated with prescriptions for communities because of their unique characteristics and philosophies. Instead a better approach is to build on the strengths teachers already exhibit by giving them access to support and trained knowledge. An important part of this is giving teachers help to transfer theoretical principles into practice. Attention should be given to focusing on the specific occasions in centre life when support and learning is most relevant to mothers. In the study, these were readily identifiable as associated with mothers' child driven experiences as they progressed through the centre. What is most important about this approach is that it changes teachers' formal non-contextual provision, to mothers being empowered to take the initiative to address their own needs during individual encounters with teachers. There is every reason to suppose that integrated support is the important underpinning of any centre programme as it reflects the success of the informal systems in all centres. However, before it can be a reality not only do these principles need to be recognised by teachers but also they require support to implement them. Wenger (1999) believed this was the basis of true communities of learning where participants contribute and engage

around an enterprise rather than being in a classroom where everyone is learning the same thing. An important aspect of recognising the relevance of integrated support opportunities for mothers is for there to be a shift in teachers' beliefs that formal support must have comprehensive planned dimensions. Then an investment can be made in capitalising on the times when incidental opportunities routinely present.

In the study occasions when teachers were most able to provide effective facilitation were easily identifiable. They predominantly occurred during times of transition, during the early stages of membership and later when the child went to school. The induction period was particularly important because it was characterised by greater reliance on teachers when mothers were new and uncertain before the development of any peer networks. In the transition to school, teachers provided hugely successful support because they tapped into the mother-initiated systems of the group relationships. However, the difficulty was that teachers' actions were involuntary, so that whilst they were surprised and rewarded by mothers' enthusiastic response on these occasions they were unaware of the reasons for their success. Then, because of the low parent support priority in relation to the child-focused programme, as well as beliefs about adult learning needing to be couched in formally structured programmes, teachers did not explore it further.

The common denominator for potential support for mothers was the child, highlighting the potential for partnership between teachers and mothers. Initially there was a need for both mother and child to feel welcome in a warm environment of teacher attention whilst they adjusted to centre routines. Teachers were highly responsive to these early requirements on the basis of introducing a new child to the group. Swick (2004) confirmed, the elements of potential participation for parents are essential in promoting support. It was not only a period for the dissemination of teachers' trained expertise within embedded experiences, but also a mutually rewarding time that reinforced teachers feeling confident because they invited repetition. Success was achieved through teachers having the opportunity to use a repertoire of effective familiar formal routines as well as being able to interact with individual mothers rather than the whole group.

Dalli (1997) advocated these times represent the most effective type of support for mother and child because it satisfies the needs of both that are often indivisible. The author believed dual support should be better utilised, not only because it is appropriate and saves time, but also because of the opportunities it presents as an alternative to developing separate programmes. Weissbourd and Kagan (1989) argued similarly that mothers' and children's lives are so inextricably woven in the early years it is difficult to decide what features of support are useful for wellbeing and growth for mothers alone.

Apart from teachers being able to capitalise on transition periods to offer support to mothers, they can also anticipate other vulnerable times by their understanding of the cyclical nature of centre life. Braun (1992) argued similarly, that it is important to recognise the cyclical nature of centre relationships because they constitute a major factor in supporting parents. The author believed rather than "working with parents" it was in a sense more about specific provision for "new" and "more experienced" mothers on a continuum. Lave and Wenger (1991) similarly identified mothers' membership as cyclical with a developmental progression from novice to expert. A progressive view of mothers' participation suggests that not only do different stages of growth provide a focus for teachers when supporting mothers, but that more experienced mothers are an untapped human resource as well as having the particular qualities inherent in level status peer relationships. Powell et al. (2005) found particular support benefits available through peer relationships demonstrated in playcentre communities, suggesting this has far greater possibilities than was recognised in teacher-led centres in the current study. It is to be expected that expert mothers not only understand the centre community well but have also had more parenting experiences. At the same time this suggests value for the particular early childhood community because their unique traditions are perpetuated this way. The same sentiments were expressed by both Spaggiari (1998) and Wenger (1999) who advocated the importance of retaining traditional knowledge in communities and establishing ways to re-cycle it when experienced members leave. Capitalising on an understanding of the cyclical nature of centre membership in order to facilitate support has important potential. This is because teachers in the study were found to already have extreme expertise as to how it operated. They gleaned many experiences

from their observations of a succession of mothers enrolling and moving through the sessions, eventually transitioning to school. Teachers already used this knowledge informally, particularly in providing support for mothers' changing needs by prompting them to move from one stage to the next. The difficulty associated with increasing the incidence of support through informal cyclical change resides in teachers' lack of recognition of the effectiveness of incidental measures. Therefore success can only be achieved through attitudinal change.

7.3.5 Informal exchange as the key to support

Early childhood centres in the study have been credited with supporting mothers both formally and informally, through relationships with both staff and the rest of the community. However, the informal system was found to be the most effective whether it consisted of spontaneous benefits through the formal routines of the centre or informal everyday interpersonal exchange. There was a basis for this in Rogoff'et al.'s (2001) view that mothers' preference is open exchange. As well, it is a crucial tool of learning within such communities. Considering mothers' high need for informational support it is the main channel of in-context learning, constituting for them the most valuable benefits they obtain from centres. Powell (1998) believed because informal exchange is so readily understood it represents a contrast to the typical response of trained teachers that tends to deliver hidden messages. The author advocated there would be a climate of improved understanding and collaboration if instead teachers were to use the common language mode they shared with mothers.

In the study, apart from the success of the informal exchange being largely attributable to its language mode, another reason was its wide knowledge base from parenting to personal issues. Schumaker and Brownell (1984) believed informal support in early childhood centres was of a quality that effective exchanges occurred automatically, to such a degree that they were probably not evaluated by either participant. It was in evidence in the study where learning occurred within incremental, embedded social

learning opportunities that offered a range of authentic options. Lave and Wenger (1991) recognised the importance of everyday verbal exchange of the minutiae of life as providing the best type of support because it is attuned to mothers' ongoing needs. According to Bowman (1997) this way of gaining information reflects how most parents learn their childrearing practices, informally through contact with family and friends in their own naturally occurring community networks, despite the existence of many more intentional models of parent education.

Whilst the informal social systems in each centre effectively constituted a "mothers' system" teachers were just as much a part of it and their trained knowledge and life experiences represented an important resource in the teacher-led centres. Although teachers tended to dismiss informal exchange as valueless from the perspective of an educator, they nevertheless enjoyed the spontaneous social interaction with mothers particularly for the affinity they experienced as mothers themselves. The increased closeness between teachers' and mothers' relationships in the informal system was responsible for a reduced power differential that according to Cochran et al. (1990) ensures potential for good communication that is the only foundation upon which close support can be built. Although teachers and mothers were not peers, nevertheless mothers benefited from the closer relationships with teachers in this context because their advice was authentic and therefore more believable. It was significant that whilst teachers had greater experience as well as training, equal relationships were still a possibility with all the attendant advantages for support. McGuire and Gottleib (1979) argued similarly that it is possible for the quality of same status peer support to be assumed by non-peers when circumstances generate a perception of equal experiences.

As a consequence of the more productive relationships teachers and mothers shared in the informal system teachers were able to support mothers in many different contexts. Galinsky (1990) believed the sense of security and satisfaction gained by mothers through interaction with older teachers is a factor in their support. One of the most important roles assumed by teachers in the study was as "mediator" where teachers represented a neutral authority outside the peer relationship when there was a need to

resolve conflict. Wenger (1999) argued most situations that involve sustained association generate tensions and these are just part of the complexities that connect participants in shared practice. Another role played by teachers was as "prompter" where they provided the impetus for mothers who needed confidence to move from one stage to the next, whether this was related to becoming a committee member or pursuing a new career. White (2005) identified this type of exchange as necessary in promoting action and supporting movement in learning. K. Powell (2005) identified similar support as a feature of Playcentre network exchange.

There was ample evidence that despite the lack of value teachers placed upon the lay information that circulated in their communities, they personally made an active contribution to the informal system. Their attitudes were formed through teachers' contrasting the ordinariness of this knowledge with the planned, theoretically based concepts inherent in trained information that had taken them years of study to attain. As well, they expressed incredulity that such small fragments of information from the minutiae of life could merit the interest of mothers. However, Schumaker and Brownell (1984) argued the diminutive nature of these small pieces of information is the very reason for their popularity, because they are easily assimilated and whilst alone, they are insignificant, eventually they grow into a considerable reservoir of compound knowledge.

The importance of being able to apply what is learned to real life situations whilst enjoying group support, was emphasised by Kerslake Hendricks et al. (2004) because the processes involved in doing this both fix and personalise the learning. An important part of the social exchange for mothers too was that there were different options so that they could practise self-determination through the individual choices they made. According to Riley (1997) opportunities to exchange information within a familiar group network represent the best possible approach because mothers are more likely to adopt new parenting practices in these contexts as opposed to trying to change as a lone individual. Riley believed this was particularly the case where something was contrary to an individual's code, because amongst other things the specific group stand is

reinforced. An important advantage of the informal system was its particular responsiveness to individual needs that frequently eluded teachers, because of their group view of mothers prevalent in formal teacher-led systems in the study. Churchill (2000) argued that the authenticity that resides in individual exchanges is particularly significant when facilitating support because the unique needs and lack of an objective view make it difficult to plan group approaches.

7.4   Proposition 6: Lack of power sharing by teachers reduces the effectiveness of centres as communities of learning.

It has been argued that the support mothers gained through early childhood networks in the study came about as a result of their engagement in social practices that have been defined as both formal and informal. These relationships were the conduits for individual learning to take place. Wenger (1999) theorised that: "Engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and become who we are" (p.1). The same author believed over time collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of enterprises and attendant social relations so that they are the particular property of the kind of community created. Wenger identified the groups that share such enterprises as communities of practice where learning proceeds as a result of mutual negotiation around common theories and world understanding. At the same time when learning is the central part these may be termed learning communities. As these ideas are based upon the view that learning rather than being just an accumulation of skills and information includes identity change, the complexity of the processes involved are immediately apparent. Osterman (2000) believed the social processes required in building learning communities are actually too complex for a definition and their effectiveness is best considered through identifiable principles, chief amongst which is collaborative decision making. Rogoff et al. (2001) defined them similarly in relationship to the context of early childhood. However, at the same time she cautioned the term is frequently used too loosely and cannot just be applied to any group that

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simply meets routinely as it is not necessarily commensurate with an effective co-operative learning operation.

The degree to which the unique capacities of social co-operation associated with learning communities operated in study centres was significant, for the reason that support was contingent upon mothers' ability to engage in active self -determining processes. In relationship to the four centres in the study different degrees of collaboration were invested in their particular leadership styles that expectedly showed a natural division between teacher and parent-led services. As in the latter, mothers were responsible for their own affairs this represented a quite different type of community to the teacher-led centres. Here the presence of both teachers and mothers required negotiation between two different social groups where teachers' beliefs and attitudes were major determinants of non-collaborative outcomes. Sarason and Lorentz (1979) described this approach as not only common but concerning, because it can actually result in professionals being a major deterrent to the development of helping networks. The authors believed the quality of participant involvement in a group is related directly to the level of control of the group, advocating group rather than staff ownership, as a catalyst to yielding increased levels of participation and a closer fit between programme activities and parents' needs. As a consequence of limited social co-operation in decision making, teachers and mothers in the study became polarised into separate groups where mothers were continually reinforced into passive roles. According to Wenger (1999) power struggles often prevent full participation and excuses are easily found to exclude new members. As a result there is segregation and as both groups are engaged in separate practices they lose the benefit of their interactions.

In the study the Playcentre operation as a parent co-operative came closest to demonstrating the collaborative nature of true learning communities. Based upon these principles mothers not only engaged in shared decision making but they were able to actively support their own learning through opportunities to practice it during self-initiated activities in the session. According to Jilk (1999) being able to practise learning by teaching as a social and meaningful activity is another capacity characteristic of

learning communities. In this way the Playcentre training programme not only provided trained personnel for the centre to function, but also support for mothers in their parenting role. Being able to connect learning with their child as well as rely on anticipated peer support to do this provided continual stimulation. A growing sense of empowerment enhanced personal confidence as well as providing skills and even goals for future employment. Powell et al. (2005) found the Playcentre experience to be often the greatest contributor to self-awareness and confidence for new parents as well as a precursor to further training and careers with children. In comparison with the Playcentre although likewise mothers routinely attended, the Playgroup did not achieve the same levels of empowerment. This was because as they did not have any self-determination in how the session operated the quality of their participation was quite different. Whilst the Playgroup was promoted by teachers as being specifically for mothers, in practise this just meant it was held for the purpose of their meeting along with their child. It did not involve them in any decision making because this was assumed by the umbrella organisation of the Community Kindergarten under whose auspices the Playgroup operated. Even within the sessions, teachers took full control. Whereas originally they had given mothers rostered duties even these roles had fallen away, because as mothers supervised their own child, teachers were much less occupied than in the child-focused sessions. Consequently they had assumed the duties themselves. By teachers' definition they believed this provided support because it relieved mothers of responsibility and allowed them to enjoy their morning unencumbered. As a consequence, Playgroup mothers were neither involved in any of the decision making about the sessions, nor were they connected to opportunities for putting new learning into practice.

The difference between teacher-led and parent-led centres in terms of collaborative management structures applied particularly to their formal provision. In the study the lack of a formal forum for mothers placed limitations on their ability to influence policies that undoubtedly affected their support. However, they compensated for this by taking advantage of the wide spectrum of information that existed informally. Through the dual response of centres it could be said that the greater capacity of informal support

systems allowed them to override any inadequacies of formal provision. However, the important role that early childhood centres represent in supporting parents and the official emphasis on partnerships demands better provision than such an ad hoc delivery. Bloom (1990) supported this view by arguing the early years of parenting are fraught by health deficits particularly for mothers, who largely have to negotiate the period of transition to parenthood by trial and error, with early childhood centres constituting a major vehicle of potential support.

7.5   Mothers' focus group verification procedures

In order to gain verification of the researcher's interpretation of findings in the study two focus groups were convened, one of mothers and one of teachers, as representative of the two participant group perspectives in the sample. Discussion outcomes suggested a general consensus of agreement that support does exist in centres as both formal and informal entities, although teachers had not previously made this identification. Commensurate with mothers in the study the focus group mothers placed emphasis upon the particular benefits gained through informal exchange of ideas. Mothers believed a contrast existed between this and the detached educational programmes devised by teachers that along with study, mothers went out of their way to avoid. At the same time they emphasised the need for a wide knowledge base but conceded it was not likely to occur because it was less appealing to teachers than their educational focus. As well, focus group mothers responded positively to the idea that social awareness had been their guide in selecting a centre. However, along with findings in the study, mothers believed their ultimate satisfaction had proved to be more coincidental than based upon good judgement because of the paucity of useful information available prior to enrolment to guide their limited understanding of what was offered by the different services. D. Powell (1997a) agreed with this view, suggesting a more localised distribution within individual communities has better results.

Mothers subscribed to the idea that relationships were the major catalyst for them continuing to enjoy membership beyond just delivering their child to the centre. The friendships that developed were a major source of support and continued outside the centre. As well mothers agreed relationships with teachers represented a different level of exchange, although this was less well defined where it applied to shared authority roles in playcentres. There was also a general consensus between mothers that teachers who were mothers themselves made more empathetic listeners. Focus mothers viewed their membership as an active experience and were happier when their expectations for contribution were realised so they "got something" out of it. Playcentre mothers, as well as those with other affiliations in the focus group had particular "common knowledge" beliefs about Playcentres. One was that it was easier to contribute in a parent-led centre because decision making was within their control. As well the Playcentre training gave them a sense of empowerment that bred great confidence. The same view was expressed by Farquhar (2003) who believed parents enjoyed involvement with the education of their child because of the relevance it has for them personally.

Focus mothers who attended Playcentres displayed the same strong enthusiasm for networking and opportunities to train and implement new understandings, as well as relate it to their needs as mothers as did Playcentre mothers in the study. However, a major issue for both sets was the huge commitment it required. K. Powell (2005) agreed training for many supervisors involves a tremendous investment of time and financial resources. Discussion within the focus group centred on mothers who did not attend Playcentre expressing doubts as to whether they personally could meet such a challenge. However, in consensus with focus Playcentre mothers it was finally agreed that such things can work because of the tremendous camaraderie and consequent support it generates. Just because everyone is "in the same boat" other parents recognise exactly how to help because it also constitutes their own experience. Focus mothers all subscribed to the view that operating within smaller groups was advantageous both in providing good transition from low commitment coffee and other affiliations as well as for exchanging information. Ideas within the focus group equated with the idea of

intimate groups within centre communities being particularly relevant for the support of ever changing needs.

The findings from the teachers' focus group supported the researcher's interpretation of the study findings. However, it demonstrated more points of difference than the mothers' focus group, reflecting the same divergent perspectives that existed between these two groups in the study. In the same way as mothers, teachers also acknowledged the existence of formal and informal social systems operating in their centres, although they had not considered it this way before. However, once alerted to the possibility, teachers' demonstrated similar attitudes and beliefs in their discussion that were reflected in the study related to teacher authority and privileged knowledge. Coupled with this there was a tension between ownership of the child in terms of authority that was relevant to developing shared partnerships. Farquhar (2005) argued these cannot develop outside a climate of teachers acknowledging parents' comprehensive understanding of their own child as an important aspect of early childhood learning. She argued teachers' knowledge however trained, is incomplete being context specific compared with the breadth and depth of parents' understanding. Teachers in the focus group agreed there was a power differential between teachers and mothers. However, they did not concur with the researcher's suggestion that this may compromise mothers' ability to contribute and gain support. Instead, like teachers in the study they believed teachers' authority must prevail in the classroom because of their training. In any case they did not anticipate this as a threat to support because similar to teachers in the study they viewed it as a commodity dispensed to mothers as passive recipients. Bruhn and Phillips (1984) claimed not only is this an erroneous view, denying mothers access to active roles but it reflects a lack of recognition that learning principles understood for children are also applicable to adults. Attitudes of focus group teachers described the same patterns identified by the researcher as reflecting non-collaborative practices. They worked hard at building relationships with mothers, but only up to a point, as they preferred to preserve professional detachment. However, like the study teachers they then perceived a tension because they did not know enough about mothers' needs, but were unable to reconcile this with shared decision making. Focus teachers used the same

strategies evident in the study, where the child focus was emphasised as representing a legitimate deflection from working with parents, suggesting that they likewise experienced the same difficulties with operating an integrated approach.

Focus teachers, similarly to teachers in the study, believed communication of knowledge to parents was fraught with difficulties. Focus teachers believed formally planned isolated delivery of educational information, with extensive use of the written medium was not only expedient but an expected hurdle for mothers to negotiate as part of their education. They did not agree with the researcher's interpretation that it was less successful than the accumulation of appropriate informal incidental information associated with the minutiae of everyday exchange. Congruent with teachers in the study this did not seem to be "doing enough," again reflecting a desire to do something to support parents, but not knowing what that might be.

There was agreement that communication was a particular issue when associated with ethnic minority parents. Focus teachers agreed they were experiencing the same inadequacies as the study teachers where they attempted to welcome mothers but were really confused as to how the growing issue of multicultural communities could best be served. Mitchell (2003) confirmed the tendency of teachers to communicate less with parents who were not confident English speakers. In the same way as the focus mothers, focus teachers approved of Playcentre training and associated support benefits, but believed it was a particular function of parent-led centres that did not have particular relevance for teacher-led services.

The focus group findings served to confirm Brotherson's (1994) view that qualitative research is essentially an act of interpretation that examines the multiple meanings that are constructed through the sharing of individual experiences. Expectedly, participants' different foci and expectations drove their particular viewpoints. Whilst insights were gained through the group interviews, nothing emerged to suggest that there should be changes made to the interpretation of the findings. Rather, the view was reinforced that the study results may well have wider application.

7.6   Summary

It has been argued that mothers gained support through their own active capacities for building relationships and contributing to their centre communities. However, in order to do this they required reciprocal responses from the centres that ultimately determined the quality of support. Although the particular outcomes were often dictated by centre structures, staff beliefs and attitudes were an important influence. As a consequence study centres revealed a natural division between teacher and parent-led groups. As in the former, teachers held the decision-making power that curbed mothers' ability to respond actively therefore providing a barrier to effective support. In contrast to this, the parent-led group operated according to the collaborative principles that formed the basis of the particular service structure. However, whilst differences in social co-operation existed between the teacher and parent-led groups according to their formal structures there were other determining factors. The most defining of these was that support rather than just being a product of formally established systems also existed informally. Consequently centres may be said to have had a dual response to mothers' support needs through both a formal and an informal system. As the informal system was by far the more responsive of these two it counterbalanced the more limited opportunities mothers experienced for contribution in formal systems. At the same time it drew a further distinction between the teacher-led and parent-led groups. Whilst the Playcentre mothers had the advantage of a greater degree of self-determination and contribution in both systems, they had less access to staff with lengthy experience and completed training.

The informal systems in centres need to be acknowledged as having important support characteristics in terms of relationship building and opportunities for contribution. However, there is a need for these to be increasingly emulated with a deeper understanding of their worth in formal provision. Not only is this significant both for the support potential early childhood centres represent for mothers as well as for realising the vision in the Strategic Plan for effective partnerships between teachers and parents (Ministry of Education, 2002). However, at the same time caution is required to divorce

these innovations from standardised provision that can only be counterproductive in preserving the uniqueness of early childhood communities.

The operation of dual support systems in early childhood centres in the study is summarised in figure 4. Figure 4.was also used as the basis of discussion for the verification focus groups. The figure shows the existence of overlapping formal and informal support systems in the ecologies of both the teacher-led and parent-led centres in the study. The figure shows the existence of overlapping formal and informal support systems in both the teacher and parent-led centres in the study. It draws upon Bronfenbrenners' ecological model, ecology being the study of the relations between people and resources and socio-cultural patterns in the environment. In figure 4 the circles represent how the social systems in the study operated in this regard, indicating the direct participation of teachers, mothers and children within the different socio-cultural environments of the micro and mesosystems associated with the different communities. The circles at the top of the figure represent how the social systems operated in the teacher-led and the lower set the parent-led groups. These systems were not discrete and may be seen to intersect, so that in reality teachers and mothers moved freely in and out of them. The way that the two systems overlap in both cases shows their perceived degree of separation in the two different service structures of the teacher-led and parent-led groups. They are shown as almost superimposed in the parent-led group. This indicates that the formal and informal systems operated very closely here, so that the influence of the formal system was considerably reduced overall, allowing the informal system that had a greater propensity for maternal support to prevail. The text within the systems is an indication of how the different aspects of centre life operated either formally or informally within the different services. The text likewise shows how centre systems related to the exosystem outside the immediate community of the centre, but within the local neighbourhood, that was a particular feature of the parent-led group. At the same time the systems were encapsulated within the wider macrosystem indicated by Bronfenbrenner, in the way in which they complied with central early childhood policies emanating from Government levels.

Figure 4.

SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES IN THE STUDY
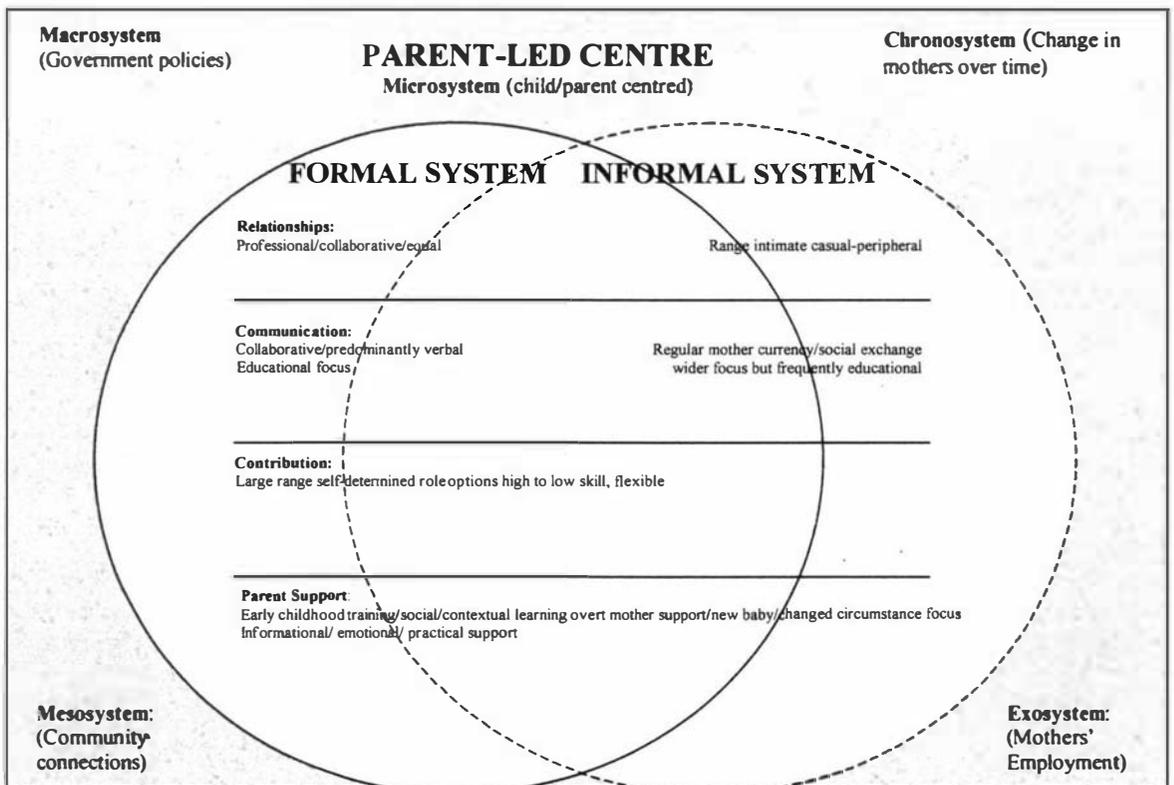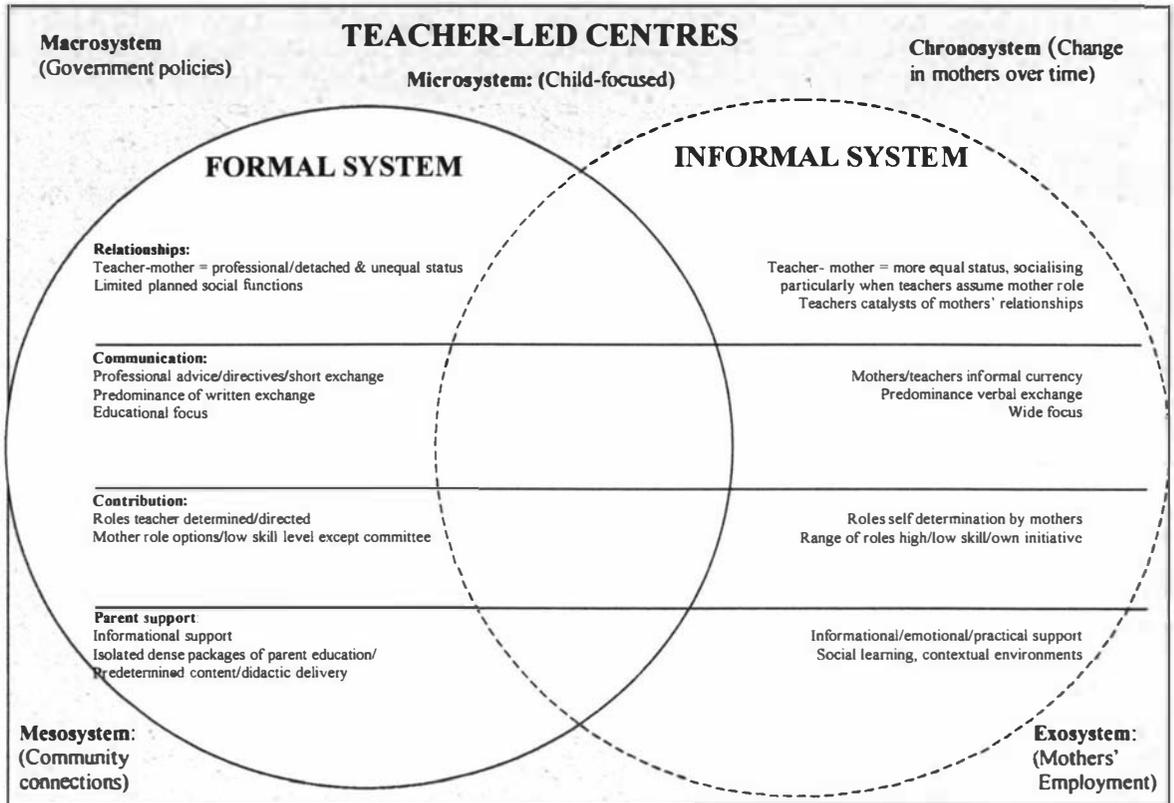
Chapter seven drew together the responses of the four early childhood centres in the study to mothers' requirements for support. Chapter eight concludes with recommendations and implications for further study.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion with recommendations and implications

8.1   Introduction: support for mothers by early childhood centres

In the previous two chapters the findings of the study were discussed in detail with each culminating in figures showing firstly, how mothers' networks of support were constructed and secondly, how centres responded to support needs through both formal and informal systems. By contrast, chapter eight overviews the broad lines of the thesis in order to highlight the most salient features that have emerged from the mass of findings. In order to do this the original research questions are first revisited along with the propositions that developed from the accumulation of data through the iterative process. After this the methodology and data collection methods are reviewed along with limitations of the present study. Implications for further research and policy are also considered, followed by concluding statements.

8.2   A synopsis of the research questions

The study set out to address six research questions that focused on the perceptions of staff and mothers regarding: the nature of maternal support, to what degree support was a feature of early childhood centres in the study, and whether support served ongoing needs. The original questions addressed in this concluding chapter are re-stated:

1   To what degree do mothers believe they need and gain personal support as a result of being members of an early childhood centre?

2   What according to first time mothers is the nature of effective support?

3   Can it be inferred that any support received by mothers from centres is responsive to their changing needs over time?

4   To what extent do the staff believe they have a role in supporting mothers who attend early childhood centres?

5   What are staff perceptions of the nature of effective support for mothers?

6   To what extent can the early childhood centres be viewed as learning communities where the contribution of all participants is recognised and valued in terms of learning and social support?

The research questions that led to the study were answered through a combination of reviewing relevant literature and conducting field work in four early childhood centres. The responses to these questions culminated in six theoretical propositions that described two themes. The first of these was: Mothers gained incremental support through active processes associated with building relationships and contribution. The second theme showed support was the product of both formal and informal social systems. Chapter eight continues with summaries for each of the original research questions, beginning with those that contributed to the first theme regarding mother's active response to gaining support.

8.2.1   To what degree do mothers believe they need and gain personal support as a result of being members of an early childhood centre?

Mothers' first requirements were for informational and emotional support to meet demands associated with their child's ongoing development. They actively sought this through the socially driven selection of a compatible early childhood centre that led to the establishment of personal networks that were the catalysts of support. With the growing independence of their child, relationships developed that were capable of

transcending centre settings as well as leading to more personal support as mothers' own interests were reasserted. As gaining support was contingent upon mothers' own contribution, a socially co-operative environment offered the best opportunities. In the study this occurred within formal systems on the basis of how necessary mothers' presence was perceived to be for the centre to function. Whilst in the Playcentre, as a parent-led co-operative, there was a complete reliance upon mothers' active participation there was not the same compulsion for it to occur in the teacher-led services. More than this, teachers' beliefs about their role and the value of trained knowledge generated a general reluctance to share responsibility with mothers. At the same time, unlike the parent-led centre, social activities were not regarded as a high priority. Whilst these actions in the teacher-led centres inevitably had consequences for support, rather than being attributable to teachers' indifference, they were evidence of a different support definition. As teachers believed support to be a commodity they dispensed to mothers, they did not associate it with an active process. Therefore, they neither recognised mothers' need for active involvement in centre decision making, nor took any responsibility for the relationships they set out to build.

8.2.2   What according to first time mothers is the nature of effective support?

The nature of effective support for mothers was that they were able to contract and maintain appropriate relationships that served the purpose of child-driven as well as personal needs in terms of informational, emotional and practical support. Mothers' requirements were defined through two main periods: an initial reliance on staff, followed by peer connections with the wider community. Whilst intimate friendship was the goal of all mothers, for the special quality of emotional support it provided, mothers gained benefits as a consequence of many different types of social connection. Cochran et al (1990) argued similarly that relationships do not have to be close in order to be useful and those that are peripheral also serve an important purpose. Although mothers' information needs changed as they progressed through the centre, the criteria upon which they were based remained invariable. Effective support was perceived to be:

authentic, contextual, and wide spectrum, gained through the exchange of the minutiae of everyday life that established the basis of a considerable repertoire of knowledge. Staff were particularly responsive to mothers' support needs during the induction period as a reflection of their cyclical knowledge of the centre and motivation to settle the child. It was exemplary of the many occasions mothers gained effective support when there was a good fit between the routine actions of staff and the interrelated needs of mother and child. Likewise, in these early days the warm welcoming atmosphere generated by staff, along with mothers' euphoria of having engaged with a compatible centre went a long way towards sustaining them during the difficult time of adjustment. Bartlett (2001) likewise confirmed this as a confusing and stressful time as mothers try to understand the internal mechanisms of an early childhood organisation.

As mothers became increasingly familiar with the operation of the centre they began to initiate and build networks with their peers. Eventually these relationships operated on a new level as mothers moved from complete immersion in their child's needs to a growing reassertion of their own. This signalled a period of increased confidence for mothers when they not only sought more personal reinforcement from friendships within their own fields of interest, but began to make an increased contribution to the centre, as well as expanding their horizons in the wider community. The support mothers gained through these actions was rewarded by increased social status within their early childhood community and a growing personal self-efficacy.

8.2.3 Can it be inferred that any support received by mothers from centres is responsive to their changing needs over time?

The most recognisable feature of mothers' support needs was that they were child-driven and therefore never static, even accounting for mothers' shift to a more personal support focus as their child gained independence. Galinsky (1990) argued similarly that parent growth is shaped by interaction with their children to the degree that the child's

development leads parents from stage-to-stage. Although the seamless nature of how mothers gained incremental support accedes to complex processes, it was traceable to two main features. These were: mothers' own active provision (albeit involuntarily) through same stage group relationships and staff responsiveness to mothers' needs through their expert knowledge of the cyclical nature of centres.

Mothers' own provision centred on group relationships established around enrolment that took advantage of their peers' same stage needs for knowledge and adjustment as they moved from novice to expert mother in the centre. Mothers quickly realised they gained a much wider information coverage from multiple sources than from within single relationships. Also, within same stage groups there was no need to filter out information that was inevitably part of the more general repertoire of the entire community. At the same time group relationships provided continuous support during a period that was prone to spasmodic attendance. Cochran et al. (1990) argued similarly this is because during the temporary absence of a group member others take up the support, so the loss is not experienced as much as it would be in an individual relationship. During the first phase of membership the group relationships provided mothers with support for child-driven needs. In the second, mothers' familiarity with individuals in the group was able to provide the basis for more personal friendships within more permanent networks based on mutual interests. Smith et al. (2000) confirmed likewise that it is frequently the case that mothers' personal needs are initially suppressed in favour of fulfilling parenting needs for their child. Larner (1997) attested to mutual interests being the catalysts of enmeshing life courses in ultimate friendship.

During both phases staff demonstrated a particular responsiveness to mothers gaining effective incremental support. Success was attributable to the good fit between maternal and centre needs. Not only were staff successful because of their cyclical knowledge of the centre, but also for the dual support they provided. Whilst this was the consequence of child-focused efforts it also supported mothers' closely interrelated needs. As incremental support from these particular sources was primarily gained through the medium of everyday exchange, it was established as the result of the more flexible

informal systems in centres, as a consequence of their sensitivity to mothers' changing needs. The final three research question summaries show how mothers benefited from both formal and informal sources of support.

8.2.4   To what extent do staff believe they have a role in supporting mothers who attend early childhood centres?

Although all staff believed they had a role supporting mothers, they thought differently about it according to whether they operated in the Playcentre or the teacher-led services. This was primarily as a consequence of the different service purposes that were responsible for expectations and the impetus behind staff actions. Accordingly, Playcentre staff had a child-mother focus. This was demonstrated by strong ambitions to support mothers to fulfil their commitment to training and supervision that had implications for the functioning of the centre. On the other hand teachers' beliefs about their role being child-focused relegated parent support to a secondary position. In this regard whilst teachers were enthusiastic about their obligations to legislated partnerships these relationships only operated at an ideological level. Teachers found it very difficult to put them into practice, because whilst they were warm, friendly and empathetic this did not extend to sharing power with parents. Unlike in the parent-led centre that was founded upon principles of shared decision making within a socially similar group, teachers operated a non-collaborative leadership style that stemmed from professional ideas about trained knowledge that had led to a mistrust of lay information. Hughes and McNaughton (1999b) argued parental knowledge is often presented as supplemental rather than complementary to professional knowledge that inevitably places these in a hierarchy, so that parent knowledge is subordinate to that of teachers.

Apart from teachers' reservations regarding parents' ability to make a useful contribution in a professional climate, they had difficulties with the equity partnerships implied, as well as not knowing how to establish co-operative systems. Middleton and May (1997) argued similarly that teachers find working with parents a very stressful

aspect of their job because they have difficulty with what type of relationships they should foster, even if they have a role with them at all. A major reason for teachers' sense of inadequacy with parents in the study was a lack of training in adult facilitation. Grey and Horgan (2003) likewise found a prevalent deficit culture in support provision for parents where teachers perceived their role was imparting knowledge to uninformed parents. Although training for adult facilitation was lacking, teachers had not been left without direction through a succession of policy documents (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2000; 2002). However, teachers' understanding of these directions suggested that theoretical concepts were not always easily translated into prescription. Cullen (2003) confirmed the difficulties of interpreting Te Whaariki as a guide to practice was due to training issues where fragmented and incomplete training of many practitioners has had consequences for the conceptual leap between theory and practice. The difficulties teachers experienced in facilitating parents were further exacerbated by the low profile given to parent education and support in staff meetings. Grey and Horgan (2003) believed similarly while partnerships were often mentioned in professional dialogue, as a concept they were rarely discussed and debated. The assumption that teachers are able to establish socially co-operative systems with parents entirely upon the basis of their early childhood training was not borne out in the study.

8.2.5   What are staff perceptions of the nature of effective support for mothers?

Apart from staff perceptions about their support role differing in the Playcentre and teacher-led services, their views on what constituted support were also distinct. Whereas Playcentre staff, like mothers, had a wide spectrum view of support, teachers focused exclusively on it being packaged educational knowledge. Playcentre staff believed in contrast, support emanated from the socially co-operative practices that were reinforced by Playcentre training as an integral part of their programme. However, teachers held to a traditional delivery of adult learning as the most effective support for mothers. This accommodated their definition of support as a commodity dispensed by teachers, rather than being the result of an active response by mothers. Teachers' traditional views were

reinforced by the temporal convenience of only having to consider a parent programme occasionally as well as reducing workload. As well teachers' general anxieties about working with parents were ameliorated when they operated within a familiar educational focus. It also constituted a tangible delivery that gave teachers more confidence than they experienced in dealing with the nebulous and equitable concepts inferred in the idea of partnership. Likewise a compartmentalised delivery also served to maintain teachers' systems of social control that helped to reduce contact and collaboration with parents that teachers found a major challenge.

8.2.6 To what extent can early childhood centres be viewed as learning communities where the contribution of all participants is recognised and valued in terms of learning and social support?

Learning communities in common parlance refer to groups with an educational focus that work together collaboratively in order to bring collective goals to fruition. In relating this to centres in the study it is cogent to refer to Rogoff's (1994) caution that the term is often used loosely without the true meaning being reflected in the reality, because achieving it is very complex. In the purist sense learning communities are grounded in collaborative processes that may be measured against multiple criteria, so that tracking these presents a challenge that was not the intention of the study. However, in hindsight, research question six was an important inclusion because social co-operation was found to be of major importance because of the contingency of mothers' support upon self-determination. In addressing the research question the term learning community was taken in its broadest sense, placing an emphasis on the degree to which early childhood centres in the study demonstrated the ability to operate collaboratively.

In the context of effective collaboration being based upon shared decision making that recognises individuals' different but equal contributions, study centres described two groups: teacher-led and parent-led. As the Playcentre was structurally founded upon parent co-operation and only parents were involved, there were fewer difficulties

regarding self-determination being a natural outcome of the service. In contrast teachers' attitudes and uncertainty regarding their parent role in the teacher-led centres established a hierarchy where teachers and mothers formed two distinct social groups. As a consequence these mothers had much more difficulty achieving the same levels of contribution with subsequent implications for support. Teachers' non-collaborative leadership in the teacher-led centres went unchallenged by mothers largely as a result of expectations they learned regarding role distribution during initial socialisation. As well, it was very difficult to achieve from their disempowered position either as individuals or through raising a ground swell of opinion. However, mothers were still able to actively express disfavour when they disagreed with teachers' non-collaborative decision making through passive resistance, by ignoring notices or parent education sessions. Whilst these actions gained teachers' attention, precipitating change was still a lengthy process, because teachers' processes relied on working through issues with little recourse to parents. Even when they did consult parents because it was mainly through written communication there were inconclusive outcomes. As a consequence, teachers attributed the poor response from parents to a lack of interest. As they were not exposed to alternative ideas this served to further reinforce teachers' view that social co-operation with parents was unproductive. Grey and Horgan (2003) argued similarly that collaborative operations rely on effective communication.

The limited communication between teachers and mothers in teacher-led services in the study was a major barrier to collaborative practices. However resolution was difficult because the situation was politically motivated rather than being merely a question of teachers learning how to communicate. Hughes and McNaughton (1999b) argued likewise that because teachers control information in order to retain their authority, improving communication alone cannot facilitate better relationships between staff and parents, unless it also addresses the politics of knowledge underpinning them. The potency of political forces in the study was seen in the way it influenced teachers' reflection on their practice. As this was always associated with beliefs regarding professional infallibility, confronting issues invariably meant teachers' actions were reinforced as exemplary with any change needing to come from parents. Hatton and

Smith (1995) argued such outcomes are widespread in centres as teachers find reflective practice hard because of the way teaching is associated with present tense formative processes that do not relate well to remote academic theory. As a consequence of the difficulties teachers experience in identifying the need for change in their practices, it is probable that this is unlikely to occur without outside support. Mitchell (2003) likewise suggested the complexity involved in modification of practices means it is only possible through external intervention.

Despite the difficulties that mothers encountered in gaining active participation through membership of teacher-led services, these existed only with regard to formal processes. Mothers were able to use opportunities for support within informal systems in their centres where they could operate unrestrictedly in self-determining roles according to social learning principles. Success was established upon equal relationships that were a feature of all centres, both teacher and parent-led, on the basis of common experiences of motherhood. As teachers responded as mothers in these systems the latter not only had the advantage of peer relationships, but also access to trained knowledge and greater life experiences. In this sense the informal systems in all early childhood centres in the study may be said to have operated more closely with learning community principles.

8.3   A synthesis of the theoretical propositions

The above findings that addressed the original research questions culminated in a set of six theoretical propositions as a result of iterative processes. They are re-stated here:

Proposition 1: Support is contingent upon the active contribution of the mothers themselves.

Proposition 2: Support is conditional upon the development of relationships of trust at different levels within the centre community.

Proposition 3: Effective early childhood communities are responsive to the changing needs of mothers.

Proposition 4: Staff beliefs about their role as well as centre structures are major determinants of the degree to which support is promoted.

Proposition 5: Formal support involves planned delivery of information including parent education: Informal support involves the exchange of everyday incidental information through social networks.

Proposition 6: Lack of power sharing by teachers reduces the effectiveness of centres as learning communities.

The propositions broadly speaking were able to be incorporated into two themes that earlier formed the basis of discussion in chapters six and seven. The first three were developed from mothers' information that constituted the primary source of data. They proposed that mothers gained support that was continually responsive to their changing needs through active processes associated with building appropriate networks. The second theme that emerged, incorporating the last three propositions from staff secondary data was: That early childhood centres made a dual response to mothers' support needs through both formal and informal social systems. Whilst mothers were resourceful in both systems, because support is dependent upon social co-operation it was most effective where there was a basis for equitable relationships. These were most apparent in informal systems and formally in the parent-led service where there was

only one social group because staff responded as mothers. However, in the teacher-led centres relationships were based on a power differential between staff and parents that did not allow for shared views or decision making. Inevitably, as teachers represented the authority in centres and they were not exposed to alternative views, practices reflected their perspectives rather than those of mothers. As this was translated into a lack of responsiveness to mothers' needs, teachers' formal efforts in providing opportunities for support were largely left untapped. However, in the informal systems a where relationships between teachers and mothers were based upon the equality of motherhood they generated a collaborative environment. Here mothers were able to exercise their capacities for gaining support through a repertoire of authentic, contextual information.

The development of propositions in this study contributed to themes that mothers actively gained incremental support and this was through the function of both formal and informal social systems. The use of these propositions has enabled connections between variables identified in previous studies (see 8.4) to be highlighted, thereby establishing a stronger interpretation of a centre's role in provision of parent support.

8.4   Links to other studies

The research literature has been an important part of this qualitative study, constituting an aspect of the findings with particular emphasis on: support needs in early motherhood, building and maintenance of social networks and early childhood centres as places of support. It is relevant at this concluding stage to revisit studies in the broader field of research that have particularly resonated with the present findings. They are set out according to their connection with the two major themes that emerged from the study: Mothers made an active contribution to their own support through relationships and the formal and informal nature of support resources.

8.4.1   Mothers' active support role through the establishment of relationships

Dalli's (1997) personal account of childcare experiences as a mother provided a starting point for the study, being one of the few articles that focused on personal rather than parenting support for mothers, the researcher's first level of interest. However, the support needs of a mother and her child are so closely intertwined as to be almost inextricable (Smith et al., 2000). Therefore, not unexpectedly given the purpose of the teacher-led centres, there was a prevalence towards satisfying mothers' child-focused, rather than personal needs. As a consequence mothers may be viewed as resourceful in accessing their own personal support in environments not always set up for adult facilitation (See proposition 1). However, the significant social capital outcomes in the parent-led service suggested an important factor is that mothers' personal needs may be easily accommodated alongside those of children without the need for separate programmes. Dalli (1997) likewise was impressed by the dual support possibilities presented by early childhood centres from a personal perspective. Further weight has been added to this concept recently in a much more comprehensive study undertaken with a considerably larger sample (Powell et al., 2005). Social capital that provided the context for the Powell et al. study was defined as involving: the resources (social, cultural and economic) provided by Playcentre participation, supplemented by all the additional networks that develop around these communities. An important aspect of membership was the opportunity to interact socially and gain support, particularly as Playcentre was often found to be the primary source of adult socialisation for parents of young children. As personal support for mothers is responsible for their health and wellbeing and this has such an important bearing on their parenting role it suggests that more attention needs to be paid to facilitating environments that support personal as well as parenting needs.

There is also the suggestion that because mothers were responsible for generating their own support and personal support particularly is much less attributable to services, this may also be a factor in determining their attitudes to its origins. Commensurate with the present study Dalli (1997) and Renwick (1989) reported mothers and teachers had a

different support concept. At the same time mothers' beliefs about their early childhood centres being child-focused meant they did not have expectations of support for themselves. However, the finding in the present study that mothers generate their own support suggests that this may also have been a factor, that mothers were less inclined to attribute to teachers what they believed they were responsible for themselves.

Mothers' selection criteria for early childhood centres have been frequently discussed in the context of them being different from those of educators, something that was also evident in the present study (Dalli, 1997; Farquhar, 1991; Smith et al., 2000). However, the findings suggested that it may be important to look beyond the assumption that mothers are making a centre selection based on child or centre related preferences. Instead they may be much more connected with their personal needs. Such a view is constructed upon the evidence that the only two mothers in the study who did not show socially-driven motivation were enrolled for childcare purposes. Likewise in the Dalli and Smith et al. studies that surveyed much larger populations, mothers accessed centres primarily for childcare. In all three cases mothers' selection by social criteria was much less evident suggesting they may have much lesser needs for support from early childhood centres when they are employed or have alternative networks. Similarly, mothers' selection criteria may also vary according to how crucial centres are to them in terms of networks of support.

Mothers' socially driven purpose in centre selection was projected towards them being in a good position for support through personal networks (See proposition 2). The complexity of this task and the lengthy processes involved were elucidated by the work of Cochran and Brassard (1979) and Cochran et al. (1990) as well as Walker and Riley (2001). These studies were foremost in highlighting the significance of social networks in provision of support, particularly when associated with a life-stage change. Of particular interest in the Walker and Riley study was the link made between parent education and mothers' social networks. It resonated with the present study in the way mothers were viewed as gaining education and support as an amalgamation of formal and informal sources, although in the present study they were considered more

discretely. At the same time mothers used the same measures to ascertain authenticity. The parallels in findings between the Cochran et al. and the Walker and Riley studies represented a useful comparison for the present study because whilst the sample was very small and within a qualitative paradigm, the Walker and Riley study was quantitative as well as representing a much larger study of over 900 mothers.

8.4.2   Formal and informal support

Whilst the Cochran et al. (1990) and Walker and Riley (2001) studies were significant in their coverage of how social networks are established and operate as channels of information for mothers in early childhood centres, they were just two studies amongst many others that promoted the importance of informal exchange over formal programmes of support (See proposition 5). Duncan et al. (2004) similarly re-examined planned programmes in the light of new insights into "a good gossip or a good yak" constituting valuable exchange (p.1). The authors found similar patterns as those identified in the present study, where parents' poor attendance at formal planned programmes of education was attributable to a general lack of interest. As a response to this the centre in the Duncan et al. study explored ways of making parent education and support more meaningful by integrating it into the informal life of the centre, as well as connecting families to outside agencies. Whilst similar steps were taken in the present study, in both cases there was a greater emphasis on staff doing things for parents rather than allowing them self determination, as well as a general lack of recognition of the useful role played by peers in authentic exchange.

8.5   A review of the methodology and data collection methods with suggestions for further research

In this section the study will be reviewed according to the soundness of the methodology with regard to validity, sample size, data collection methods and possibilities for further

research. Qualitative research represents a multiplicity of complex processes that all require the full attention of the researcher. Most important are the relationships that are inevitably part of the interactions during data collection for which informed consent procedures lay a firm basis. The nature of qualitative research accepts that the present study cannot be replicated, as even if similar data collection methods are applied to comparable settings the uniqueness of the latter would yield new insights (Kinchenloe & McLaren, 1998). As a consequence, whilst the findings cannot be inferred more generally, they still represent insights that are important additions to present knowledge both in the debate they inspire as well as the new research avenues they suggest.

An early issue in the study concerned difficulties associated with recruitment of maternal participants. First time mothers were sought because of the particular focus on adjustment to motherhood, however, they were much more elusive than expected causing considerable anxiety related to being able to recruit the sample. It is difficult to see how this could have been avoided considering the short time frame of the project. However, it is worthwhile to take into consideration that recruiting first time mothers from kindergartens may always be more difficult because waiting lists determine children do not attend before the age of three of four, by which time they usually have other siblings. Not only does this have implications for the use of kindergartens as contexts for research with a focus on first time mothers, but also for their support. This will inevitably be more limited if mothers are unable to attend a centre until they have subsequent children, unless they enrol in another service meanwhile.

The chosen methodology was successful in generating appropriate data for the purpose of the present study, although an overload of material, frequently an issue with qualitative measures, involved considerable time-consuming reduction. Methods chosen likewise proved in general, to be appropriate ways of collecting data, although the diaries were less satisfactory than had been anticipated. Responses were highly variable in terms of the quantity of material recorded. However, diaries should not be abandoned as a method, as they were found to be highly successful for mothers who had a preference for detached communication. Instead, a more assiduous use is recommended

for the unique opportunities diaries represent for effective data collection with specific participants. At the same time there should be reservations for diary use with second language users, unless translations are considered. Not only did the mothers have difficulty writing entries, they were also anxious about the researcher reading their attempts. However, although these mothers had problems with the diaries the process yielded serendipitous findings in highlighting the need for a better understanding of their integration and support needs. Whalley (2002) argued ethnic minorities are growing more rapidly than majorities in some countries and supporting individuals from these groups is an important consideration. More assiduous phone monitoring of diary entries over the period they were operating could also have improved data returns.

The inductive processes that were an important aspect of data analysis resulted in an end product that constituted a complexity of interrelated concepts. Consequently they lent themselves more readily to multiple theory generation rather than being associated with one particular model. Therefore, the development of theoretical or causal statements termed propositions was a useful way to express the results. According to Neuman (2003) propositions can be used to identify connections between variables, so that it may be seen how the variation in one concept occurs according to the variation in another. Propositions were also advantageous in structuring results as well as representing yet another starting point in the iterative process that C. Nachmias, and D. Nachmias (1985) suggested was both appropriate and advantageous from which to review the nature of the various concepts. In this way the propositions also served the purpose of ultimately reducing the mass of emergent theory to a manageable focus for discussion and recommendations that reflect the inductive purpose of qualitative research. Ultimately the propositions were also useful in highlighting the connections between variables thereby leading to the unique contribution made by the study.

As a qualitative study the focus was upon obtaining in-depth understanding of the social support operation of four early childhood centres, rather than it being the intention to generalise these findings to other settings. Therefore the recommendations have been made upon the basis of a very small sample of participants. However, as the findings

were commensurate with the larger body of evidence represented in current literature it would be useful to survey a more extensive population in order to consider the findings with a wider audience. As many concepts have already been developed as a result of the in-depth analysis, the use of questionnaires could be considered as a follow up that would constitute an acceptable mixed method extension to the present study.

Given the importance and the complexity of the topic studied it would be advantageous to conduct further research that would follow up various aspects that invite further investigation. One of these was that despite all the early childhood centres in the study being sessional in nature they represented very diverse operations that culminated in different support benefits. Participants were drawn from sessional services based on the belief that mothers' increased presence would give greater exposure to support opportunities. However, findings suggested this may have been an erroneous assumption, as rather than support being related to time spent in centres (although this has a bearing) it may be more dependent upon mothers' ability to influence decision making. This is based upon evidence that the Playcentre and Playgroup mothers by remaining on the premises may be expected to have attended structurally similar sessions. Yet, they were exposed to very different levels of self-determination and this had obvious consequences for support outcomes. Research needs to investigate this effect further. Whilst support is dependent upon being able to make an active response it may be the perceived quality rather than the quantity of the support that is important. This has implications for instance for the support of a childcare mother who may contribute as a committee member, yet never attend sessions. She may be every bit as supported by this aspect of involvement as another mother who spends many hours a week in a centre.

At the same time consideration of support for mothers whose children are enrolled in childcare is another topic area that requires further exploration. The study suggested, although based upon a very small sample (two mothers who used centres as part childcare because they were employed fulltime) that these mothers were far less dependent upon their early childhood networks for support. In fact they avoided making

a contribution to the life of their centres because of concerns that with their other commitments they were unable to service further relationships. It is probable that the social systems of these mothers may be based upon very different patterns than those of their counterparts who do not work in paid employment. At the same time there are implications for work networks being much less useful in terms of exposure to repertoires of parenting information. As mothers' socialising gains them both parenting as well as personal support, there is a need to better understand their requirements according to whether they are reliant on or independent of early childhood networks.

Another important issue that arose in the study in terms of further research concerns the responsibility placed upon teachers to support and build partnerships with parents as part of their professional role. According to Smith et al. (2000) inevitably bringing about change in centres, is the prerogative of teachers as the leaders in teacher-led early childhood communities, but they cannot be expected to do this alone. Whilst the present study has recommended that teachers receive training and support to facilitate parents, both in what to do and how to do it, the actual content of this has not been determined. It is particularly challenging because an important aspect of supporting teachers is devising a programme that is not only suitable and practical but preserves the unique operation of individual centres, for therein is the true meaning of community. At the same time it must not leave teachers without firm guidelines. However, the importance of effective support outcomes for mothers, for families, for the community and society at large demands further research into the best ways that it can be facilitated.

8.6 Implications of the present study for early childhood centre support for mothers

The study was designed to investigate support for mothers in four early childhood centres. In consideration of the findings within the framework of the research questions there is a range of implications to consider as well as recommendations to increase the incidence of support. Whilst there was evidence mothers gained considerable support as

a result of centre membership, it was disquieting that this was primarily as a function of informal rather than formal systems. Concerns are that not only has support been identified as an important current issue, but the Ministry of Education has made provision for centres to be responsive to this, primarily through exhortations to build partnerships with parents (MOE, 1996; 2000; 2002).

The difference between the formal and informal social systems in the study (where the latter were most favourable for support) operated as the consequence of different relationships that because these are the catalysts of support, determine the quality of its outcomes (See proposition 2). Whereas formal relationships were characterised by a power differential, informal ones functioned on the basis of equality. This had implications for support because rather than it being a commodity dispensed by early childhood services it was a product of mothers' own active response to the provision centres made for this to occur (See proposition 1). Mothers' autonomy was significant because support was not only highly individual, but also more effective when there was a good fit with the centre environment. Consequently effectiveness was contingent upon personal responsibility. One aspect of this was anticipation of the circumstances in order to engineer a good match with their needs, as when mothers first selected a potentially compatible early childhood centre. Another was taking advantage of what the selected community already had in place, such as being able to exploit the full range of networks at their disposal. Expectedly, mothers gained most effective support where they had to expend least energy in shaping their environment. Consequently, the formal structure most conducive to mothers being able to practise self-determination was found in the Playcentre because its socially co-operative system involved them in the decision making. However, evidence that mothers were successful in gaining support in all centres implied that rather than it being contingent upon formal structures it was available wherever mothers were able to generate appropriate relationships. As these were necessarily collaborative, the most productive resource was informal systems where both teachers and mothers shared the same status of motherhood. Even more importantly because mothers' support requirements were incremental (See proposition

3) they were only able to be met through individual or same stage insight that was outside the capacity of formal generic programmes.

The unique findings of this study lie in the recognition that partnerships can only be forged through reciprocal relationships and that whilst teachers find sharing power a difficult concept, for many there is a basis for this in the shared status of motherhood. The theme identified as a result of the study that mothers are active providers of their own support, strongly implies that early childhood services are potentially supportive environments. However, rather than this being because of the programmes teachers set up for parents' education, it is by the particular response made by teachers to mothers' need for socially co-operative environments that recognise parent contribution. Grey and Horgan (2003) argued presently, non-collaborative relationships that typically exist in many centres amount to "tokenism", being the result of any attempts to build partnerships without true involvement for parents.

In the present study teachers had difficulty implementing collaborative relationships both as a concept as well as in practice. This was because of deep seated attitudes towards their professional role as well as a distrust of lay information (See proposition 4). In addition they did not know how to implement shared decision making without losing control and compromising the quality of the early childhood education they were trained to provide. As a consequence, teachers took steps to stabilise their authority by reinforcing detached professional relationships and relegating parent support to a very secondary consideration, certainly a separate programme. The lack of communication through collaborative relationships continually suppressed an understanding of mothers' support and social network requirements being able to be satisfied as an integral part of the daily programme. As a consequence teachers' attitudes were shown to be significant in determining support outcomes in formal systems of centres (propositions 4, 5 and 6) that were less effective, because they were unmodified by parental contribution. It is unlikely that teachers are able to change their perspectives and attain socially co-operative partnerships without support and training. Middleton and May (1997) believed similarly, teachers' sense of being unprepared to engage with parents was directly the

result of a lack of training. Shartrand et al.(1994) supported this view, arguing presently teachers do not have the knowledge necessary for adult provision, because formalised programmes that address how early childhood teachers relate to parents and how systems can operate for providing links with home are non-existent. It is likely that teachers would not be unresponsive to the idea of training, as those in the present study had very sincere beliefs in the ideologies of their profession as well as confidence in professional development to improve their performance. Along with this, their warm empathy towards mothers as younger versions of themselves, that established productive relationships within informal systems, suggests a strong basis upon which to build socially co-operative systems.

8.6.1   Increased collaboration in centre management

Providing support for teachers amounts to training them to facilitate parents within socially co-operative systems not only to inform and guide their practices but also modify attitudes. Grey and Horgan (2003) argued similarly because as well as learning techniques it is a political process. The latter is important apart from power sharing, because a lack of inclusion of adult facilitation in their training not only undermined teachers' sense of professionalism, but also made them question whether it was part of their role. Other arguments for specific training for teachers also reside in their perceived inability to transfer learning principles from early childhood settings to an adult context, as well as to implement practices from non-prescriptive documentation. Konzal (2000) also found early childhood teachers demonstrated a lack of transference of the learning principles they used with children to adults, implying these are context specific. At the same time teachers as the leaders in centres must take the initiative for collaborative practices as well as communicate them to mothers when they are socialised into the community. Smith et al. (2000) confirmed a teacher's role dictates they alone can take the initiative for change in centres.

An important aspect of teachers' training to facilitate socially co-operative environments is that the lengthy and complex processes involved require sustained support. Vizma (1997) believed likewise an integrated approach offers the most effective learning situation so that practical help can be given to establish collaborative practices rather than participants just being told about them. As well as involving new insights there is also the need to work at developing relationships and finding ways of resolving issues that are inclusive of all members of the community, rather than just focusing interventions on teachers. Whalley (2002) also placed emphasis upon the length of time incremental processes take to become established. Rather than a collaborative system emerging immediately just through goodwill, it entails hard work for both teachers and mothers as they gain confidence in working out how they can share and problem solve together. Whalley reported in her experiences of Pen Green, that teachers naturally harbour many anxieties about how they can maintain stability within a centre community without being overcome by parental dynamism. The current formula of support as facilitated in the COI's in New Zealand is a useful one. It includes a focus on quality practices in teaching and learning with additional dimensions of action research within centre communities as part of public policy, as well as the exchange of information with other groups (Meade, 2005).

One of the issues associated with promotion of collaborative communities is that to date very little emphasis being placed upon how relationship building occurs between teachers and mothers that is the mainstay of such processes. Apart from there having been little prescribed information for this, there has been no consideration given to the sheer amount of collaborative discussion necessary for such relationships to develop and work effectively. Smith et al. (2000) argued likewise staff-parent relationships have been addressed with far less frequency than other aspects of programmes, suggesting this is an important field for further research.

8.6.2   A changed paradigm through teacher education

An important feature of bringing about changed relationships and increased collaboration is teachers' acceptance that lay information has a contribution to make in centres. Such a shift involves teachers' appreciation that it is complementary rather than competitive with trained knowledge. It is hopeful that a natural outcome of working together will be that teachers gain insight into how mothers despite being untrained can still fulfil responsible roles. At the same time, this does not constitute a threat, because it does not diminish the need for teachers' expertise.

Whilst centre-based processes are invaluable in supporting teachers to develop socially co-operative early childhood communities they represent only a practical aspect of learning. As professionals, teachers have the need for a better understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of collaborating with and supporting parents as adult learners. These requirements are best addressed through pre-service and in-service training. Minuchin (1985) argued likewise that although practical experience is important it can never replace theoretical understanding. However, there was evidence in the study that even when teachers had both practical and theoretical knowledge a hiatus could still exist between them. Different studies by Hatton and Smith (1995) found similarly that teachers find it difficult to integrate theory with practice, believing it to be the result of their daily focus on practice making connections with theoretical concepts separate and very distant. Cullen (2003) argued difficulties associated with making the conceptual leap between theory and practice was attributable to the fragmented and incomplete training of many practitioners. These outcomes suggest that exploring the connections between theoretical concepts and practice is an important aspect of training.

One of the reasons for advocating for increased theoretical understanding for teachers regarding adult support and education is because they demonstrated a high degree of competency informally. However, their distrust of non-traditional methods of adult learning meant they did not value these interactions. Yet these understandings had particular significance because of the opportunities they held for transference of the

characteristics of effective informal support to the formal system. This was desirable for several important reasons. It would dispense with the necessity for a separate programme for supporting mothers by incorporating their enmeshed needs with those of their child. It would also be cost effective. At the same time it would have major benefits in preserving the unique nature of centres by not introducing standardisation. Once teachers are trained to facilitate adults then incidental methods still represent the best option for duplication of informal success within the formal systems.

One of the issues associated with formalisation of informal characteristics is recognition of when this should occur, because of the difficulties of recognising and implementing abstract concepts. It was exemplified by the way one of the reasons educational packages were preferred by teachers was because they represented a tangible delivery, as opposed to the more nebulous concept of support. Schumaker and Brownell (1984) believed likewise support transactions are difficult to recognise because they can actually be so effective that they occur as an automatic response, so they are probably not evaluated by either participant. However, one of the exciting possibilities of transference of informal methods of facilitation to formal programmes is that once teachers recognise their significance they can be very easily identified. As well, because they are self-reinforcing their incidence is likely to increase. Individual support within informal facilitation was indicated by the regular routines occurring in centres that reflected mothers' close association with their child. As well, mothers' needs were evident to teachers through the latter's familiarity with the cyclical nature of centre membership.

Along with providing opportunities for mothers to access support during regular teacher encounters, an important part of including mothers in their own learning is facilitating opportunities for it to be put into practice. This was exemplified by the Playcentre operation, where an important aspect of reinforcing mothers' training was setting up activities and supervising them. As a consequence mothers not only increased their learning but gained a cumulative sense of empowerment. Jilk (1999) likewise identified being able to practise learning is an important capacity associated with effective learning

communities. As one of the ways this occurred in the study was through greater self-determination in roles, it is to be expected that it will be a natural outcome of a growing capacity for social co-operation in all centres.

Underpinning all the interactions proposed as ways of promoting more collaborative early childhood communities with a view to increasing support opportunities is the part played by relationships (See proposition 2). Teachers' attitudes to lay information and their professional role meant they undervalued mothers' relationships with their peers as well as not taking responsibility for them. Consequently opportunities for mothers to meet and exchange information were very low priority in centres. Whalley (2002) argued if there is a belief that parents have rights, this needs to be reflected in the creation of spaces. The high incidence of meeting and social functions in the parent-led group suggested that for socially co-operative enterprises to be effective there needs to be frequent meeting. As this centre also demonstrated a natural increase in provision for socialising when mothers' involvement was necessary for the centre to function, it suggests this may become an automatic consequence of more co-operative systems. At the same time teachers need to know that an important aspect of collaborative systems is that rather than them being harbingers of loss, through the need to share power, they represent many benefits for teachers also in sharing the collective workload. Conducting social activities in centres represents an important opportunity for parents. It not only serves the purpose of social responsibility within centres, it also allows an extension of this into the community beyond the normal bounds of sessional services, because peer relationships are capable of existing independently when early childhood membership is past. Whilst this is particularly important when service structures are less favourable for the natural development of relationships it also engenders an important sense of community. Spaggiari (1998) believed this way early childhood centres with their unique character and initiatives are responsible for successful community functioning.

One of the most important issues for centres in developing collaborative operations is effective communication. Verbal exchange as the currency of informal systems contrasted in the study with the predominance of written information that many mothers

found challenging. According to White (2005) quality feedback is most useful for learners when it comprises "conversations" and nothing can compare with parents being themselves involved in the production of centre publications. The advantage of the development of more socially co-operative systems suggests that more discussion will in any case naturally occur. As a consequence, there will be no need for detailed one-way directives that will inevitably reduce the volume of written information to a reference level.

8.7   Implications for policy

It has been argued that the promotion of socially co-operative systems will increase the incidence of support for mothers in early childhood centres as a consequence of their having greater self-determination. This has implications for policy, because there were suggestions that whilst teachers were familiar with policy documents they had difficulty translating the desired principles into practice in their centres. In the study teachers' difficulties implementing legislated requirements for partnerships within collaborative environments showed that policies alone are not enough. Ways need to be explored where the intention of policy makers is made more explicit for practitioners. Optimism that teachers' competence with children alone is enough to meet the challenge of implementing collaborative leadership is unfounded. Firstly, teachers need support to change attitudes that perceive a lack of congruence between their trained knowledge and that of parents. Then they will be able to see how partnerships operate to the benefit of the entire community. These are strong reasons for policies to be implemented that will specifically address teacher issues through in-service courses as well as centre-based interventions.

Te Whaariki was important for the present study in that teachers were required to consider staff-parent interactions as partnerships (MOE, 1996). Since then further policy documents have been released that emphasise the importance of including parents: *The Quality Journey: He Haeranga Whai Hua* (MOE, 2000) and *Pathways to the Future*

(MOE, 2002). However in terms of parent inclusion and more particularly support for parents, policy has led teachers to view mothers' and children's needs separately. Partnerships (that teachers have in any case found difficult to implement) are conceived as affiliations between teachers and mothers as adults directed towards outcomes for children as recipients, with support for mothers constituting a separate programme. As expectations were shown in the study to be potent deciders of action, policy needs to be directed towards teachers having an expanded vision of partnerships for the importance it holds for mothers personally as well as benefiting their child. It needs to be government policy to ensure that a better balance is maintained between a child focus and parent support. Dalli (2002) likewise advocated dual integrated support, as not only effective because the interconnectedness of the relationship avoids one aspect of support suffering at the expense of the other, but also because it dispenses with the need for a separate programme. The parent-led centre in the study showed that personal support through the development of networks can easily be a dual goal without in any way diluting a child focus, re-iterating findings in the much larger study by Powell et al. (2005). In this regard it is to be regretted that the move towards compliance with early childhood training policies, whilst for an admirable purpose, is at the same time responsible for the trend towards a reduction in Playcentre support networks.

8.8   Concluding statements

A contribution of this study is that early childhood centre communities in the study were an important source of ongoing parenting and personal support for mothers. This was identified in the two major themes that emerged from the study that: Support was the result of mothers' own active provision through the establishment of collaborative relationships and support was the product of both formal and informal social systems. These systems need to be understood within an ecological framework. The particular effectiveness of informal systems to generate support reflected their collaborative nature where mothers were empowered to practice self-determination through everyday exchange of the minutiae of life. Future directions need to include the establishment of a

climate of increased social co-operation within both formal and informal systems in early childhood centres, that involves parents as a great untapped source of energies and abilities that is tantamount to their support.

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APPENDIX A.

Profiles of the early childhood centres that participated in the study:

There were four early childhood centres involved in the study as follows: A funded Playgroup, a Community Kindergarten, a Playcentre and a Free Kindergarten.

Centre profile of the Playgroup:

> *Everything is (user friendly) everything is accessible. The layout is very open plan so its easy to move around. It's easy to see everything. The first thing (that attracted me) was the activities. I felt (they) really drew me in...the variety and I liked the format of the day. It was child centred really, they could choose what they wanted to do,* (Shirley, mother).

> *We make the place so its inviting to look at. We've done like: noise control, and matting. It's actually a really friendly place and we always try to make everybody feel at home. If they (parents) come in feeling stressed, I'll say to them would you like a cup of tea, and we'll make a cup of tea,* (Nettie, teacher).

The Playgroup selected for the study operated under the auspices of a kindergarten, so that both benefited by the advantages of a mutual operation. The session had up to 25 mothers attending along with their children on one morning a week, who were aged from birth to three years. The aim was provision of a planned programme of age-appropriate activities for infants that encouraged parent interaction and involvement in the learning process. A secondary aim was to offer support and friendship through the development of relationships with staff and other parents. During the session, parents and children moved freely amongst the activities provided within and without the centre that had to be negotiated by stairs. Equipment was common with other sessional groups

that belonged to the host Centre, and age-appropriate equipment was selected from the available pool. The Playgroup programme paralleled the routines of the other sessions (where applicable) in order to aid transition. Patterns of usage in the Playgroup dictated congregation in very limited indoor space in a community facility, particularly because of the large number of adults who attended. During all sessions at the centre adults could make use of the kitchen, entrance way, bathroom or office space that provided respite from the hall's activities, although there was none available to be set aside exclusively for parent use. A main feature of the facility was the natural environmental setting enhanced by landscaping and attention to seasonal flower planting, cared for by the mothers across the groups using the facility. There were low seating facilities adjacent to the sandpit and the adventure playground that, in fine weather, encouraged conversation over tea and coffee as parents supervised their children.

Participants from the Playgroup

There were two staff operating the Playgroup session. Nettie, who came originally from Europe, was in her first early childhood role and had been Head Teacher for two years. She had a bachelor's degree, (unrelated to education), as well as a Diploma in Early Childhood Education. Louise, the second teacher, had teenage children of her own. She did not work in the other Kindergarten sessions and was there she said to help the mothers and enjoy their company. She had done some early childhood training originally, and after her own children had attended the session she was motivated to complete a Diploma of Early Childhood Education.

Rita, still in her teens was one of the youngest mothers. A member of the Indian community, she had recently migrated from Fiji. She had one son with her husband who was considerably older than herself, and lived in a household directed by her mother-in-law. This and a lack of transport made this a restricted and very isolating experience.

Wenda had been a career woman before her son's birth. She lived with her husband in a locality where she had few neighbours. She was able to travel around, having her own transport, but mostly spent her days keeping the household and caring for her son as a fulltime mum. She felt a sense of isolation during the long days during her husband's absence at work, and immediately after her son's birth had sought out a centre that would take a very young child, as well as allow her to remain throughout the session. This began her round of various services trying to find a centre that was compatible with her need for companionship.

> *You just feel left absolutely alone, no adult company, it's a hard slogger. I think*
> *people should warn you against it first before you have to go through it.*
> *I felt a bit trapped actually. The less freedom you have the more trapped you feel.*
> *I think it is lucky...women are having kids older, because usually you've had*
> *your freedom before, and so it doesn't grate on you quite so much. I've been*
> *overseas and I've (had my career) outside the home,* (Wenda, mother).

Shirley, the third Playgroup mother, had married late and waited over ten years to conceive her only child.

> *It took ten years to happen so she's quite a treasure. It's so drastically different*
> *and wonderful that I'm never slightly interested in going back to work. Its just so*
> *social the whole thing of being a mum, a really special time and its lovely,*
> (Shirley, mother Playgroup).

Centre profile of the Community Kindergarten

> *There's always tea and coffee there It is quite open and you can sit around with*
> *the kids and other mothers will sit down and talk to each other,* (Lily, mother).

There's a lovely) feeling when you walk in the door, it's a very warm feeling, just
the atmosphere. There's a very friendly atmosphere, (Ninette, teacher).

The Community Kindergarten in the study was an incorporated society. It operated on
five mornings and four afternoons weekly, for children three to five years. The high and
wide space in the main room was a feature of the Centre, giving an open ambience that
opened onto the outside play area that was sheltered by the building. This was a pleasant
grassed and treed area with a secluded outlook that allowed adults to sit and converse
whilst watching their children. The Head Teacher said that the wooden floors although
beautiful, made the main play area like a sounding box but there were presently no
moves to change this because of the economics of such an exercise.

Participants from the Community Kindergarten

Kit, the Head Teacher had gained a Diploma of Early Childhood Education through
Equivalency, and subsequently worked at the Centre 15 years, although she had
reluctantly accepted the role, and preferred to talk about sharing the role of licencee with
her team. Ninette, the second teacher was motivated to train for a Diploma after having
experienced Playcentre membership as a mother of two children and was presently
completing her training. She had previously worked nine years in daycare and prior to
her early childhood experiences worked in an office environment.

Tilly, one of the three mothers interviewed was a young solo parent who had only
recently entered the neighbourhood. Her son was four years old and she was content to
spend the sessions with him, even although mothers usually only stayed if rostered help.
Nina lived with her husband and young son and was mostly associated with a network of
friends from her original career. She worked part-time some evenings for financial
independence as well as to enjoy adult company. She was very close to her mother and
sister, and these relationships gave particular support as bringing up a child had been a
traumatic experience for her. After constant bouts of depression over several years she

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had made the decision that he would be the only one. She wept as she described her experience of motherhood:

> *I just could not go through it again (having her son), the lack of support, the waiting all day for my husband to come home, and then he would call to say he would not be home until later. I still get upset about it (four years later).*

Lily, the third mother was a recent immigrant from Singapore and lived with her husband as well as other family members. She had a four year old child and indicated an unsettled existence between New Zealand and Singapore. Her son exhibited a general insecurity so she stayed throughout the session. She conversed with her son mainly in Cantonese and Malay. She had worked full-time in Singapore, even after her son was born, until he was four months and had intended to continue to work part-time, but the arrangement between friends and relatives did not work out, so she became a full-time mum.

Centre profile of the Playcentre

> *Everything is beautifully set up. (I like) its openness. It's very open plan, spacious, you can always see where the children are, its safe, its warm and inviting,* (Aillie, mother).

> *Everything is user friendly. We even have big chairs for big people. That's a big thing at Playcentre, if a centre has big people " chairs, wow, you've got big peoples' chairs. There are always places for both children and adults...we've taken that into account because it's just the nature of Playcentre. The adults are (also) important. We have like our library area, where a lot of new mums in particular, and mums with babies spend a bit of time because it's a nice quiet area,* (Manon, leading mother).

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The Playcentre attended by mothers involved in the study operated operated on three mornings a week for children from birth to five years. It was housed in custom-built premises in a community building that provided ample informal space for parents and children alike. There was comfortable adult seating arranged as parent space so that adults could sit comfortably and mothers nurse their infants. Low-level lounge seating was situated to allow conversation as well as play with the children. At the same time there was a commanding a view of the activity area to facilitate supervision. An easy traffic flow through the main area led outside to an area where the activities were landscaped amongst grass and trees. A feature was its intimacy through the small size of the group.

Participants from the Playcentre

In the Playcentre there was no distinction drawn between members of the co-operative community, and all were in training at different stages. Staff interviews in this study were conducted with senior members of the group defined here as: those who had completed more courses, been members longer, and were taking leading roles at the time of the study. These roles changed sometimes, notably to accommodate times of additional responsibility for particular families, as for instance the birth of a baby, or illness.

> *The long-standing members, they've been for three or four years with their children, who might be four or five or whatever. They have been through the training...They have more ideas about setting up play, whereas I don't have those ideas* (Stephanie, mother).

Poppy was one of the senior mothers interviewed in a staff role, although she described her involvement as being *no more than any other mother*, except her longer term involvement had resulted in a custodial role for new members. She was enthusiastically working through the prescribed Playcentre qualifications. However a period of

unrelenting depression and generally unsettled health had taken its toll, particularly as she now had two pre-schoolers. She did not live close by, and this was a drawback as Centre culture thrived on frequent socialising in members' homes. She left amidst great consternation, but returned after a month's break. Manon was also thrilled about completing Playcentre courses to the highest level, and had joined for the purpose of qualifying without the financial outlay that other training required. She held the co-ordinator role, but said that was one of many of her duties. She looked forward to eventually using her training to become a field worker with the Playcentre Federation when her children were at school. Ailly was a mother expecting her second child. She had found confinement to the house and a life of domesticity with her son very difficult after a busy career and enjoyment of an energetic personal sports programme. Whilst she was a very independent person she was keen for adult company. By the time of her second interview, Playcentre courses had become a consuming passion. She also intended to become a field worker to continue to use the knowledge gained. Stephanie lived with her husband and a daughter. She had been a secondary school teacher, and had continued to teach remedial work for a few hours a week in the evenings. She told of her long search for a suitable centre. Initially she had tried a playgroup, but there *people basically looked through you and ignored your child*. She then contacted a local playcentre that lost her enrolment and was dissolved through poor organisation. Then another playcentre was too full. Her experiences meant involvement was very tentative initially, but by the second interview she had developed a deep interest in the centre operation, and had taken on an organisational role. Martel the third Playcentre mother had quickly returned part time to her career after her son's birth, where she had very focused managerial aspirations. By the time of the second interview she had left the Playcentre for full-time employment.

Centre profile of the Free Kindergarten

The environment is so open. The resources they have! They can set up (activities) all day, for all the time they're there and that's so child friendly, (Lauren, mother).

I think the environment is (user friendly). We try to make it as welcoming as we can. I think, physically we're quite lucky because it is a light and airy building. I know how it (effected me) when I walked in here the first time, its got (something) because its light and airy. Its quite nice and bright, but its got neutral colours. Its sort of very clean...and inviting as well...with children's pictures and just photographs and things like that.

The Free Kindergarten operated on three afternoons and five mornings for children from three to five years. It was housed in custom built premises, where the entrance led from a tree shaded, flat, well planted play area, in an open flow to the interior of the building. Whilst this was basically one room, it had alcoves of interest, that had been designated home areas or reading corners. The building had a feeling of light, airiness and tranquility. One side of the main area had access through to service rooms for the children and the kitchen. At the end of the main play area was office and storage. A feature of the area between office and entrance was the placement of two low, but adult-sized sofas. These were for adults or children and they were close to the bookshelf that contained the latter's portfolios. In addition, the greetings in different languages on the wall as well as the children's photos and pictures, made it a special place.

Participants from the Free Kindergarten

At the time of the first interview there were four staff, two of which were relieving, so the Head Teacher and the permanent staff person were interviewed. Joan was a very experienced teacher internationally and had worked in a variety of diverse early

childhood settings. She held an Early Childhood Diploma gained through Equivalency as well as a Diploma of Primary Teaching, She had a particular interest in supporting minority group families, which had largely determined the work locations she had chosen to date. She had grown up children of her own and lived some distance from where she worked. Having her own children had originally been responsible for her shift from a primary career to early childhood education training. Dorothy, the second teacher had only been a few months in the kindergarten, but she had worked in early childhood services for 25 years. She had originally trained as a teacher in the secondary sector, but after working in a friend's centre when her daughter was small she quickly realised where her real interest lay and completed a Diploma of Early Childhood Education.

Lauren a solo parent since her child's birth was now in a partnership. She was also a trained kindergarten teacher, and worked in childcare. She described her experience of being a mother, as one of difficulty:

> *Oh I missed sleeping, being able to sleep whenever I want to and sometimes its good, because you think, Oh I'd probably sleep all bloody day if I had the chance. Its even harder to be a solo mother ...because you (can't) say (to a partner) look I'm really tired, even to have someone there to watch while you're just lying down...Sleeping and exercise, that was the other big thing. Previously I used to cycle everywhere, go to the gym five or six time a week.*

Lauren was attempting to work in her own business so that she could support her family from home. However, the pressure on her health had taken its toll. Her partnership had been a source of support in recent times, and had led to the home and garden being renovated for the family use, although she had little help with her daughter. Her responses to the interview questions were of particular interest as they reflected her dual roles of mother and trained teacher. Bonny, had come recently from India. Since arriving she had lived in several different places in Auckland. After having a career in India she said life was now *totally different* and having a child *was a big responsibility.*

Rosa was also a recent immigrant from Sri Lanka. She had no transport of her own and walked to the centre. She had experienced difficulty giving up a career that had occurred to further her husband's education. She found adjusting to the culture of the New Zealand education system a challenge, particularly parent involvement in her child's education.

APPENDIX B.

Information sheet for gaining organisational consent for site access:

Project title: Support for mothers in early childhood centres.

Researcher: Avril Thesing
Researcher details: Telephone (09) 623 8899 Xn 8396

Supervisors:

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Dr.Judith Loveridge, Learning and Teaching, Massey University, Palmerston North (06) 351 3357, or freephone Albany campus (09) 443 9700 Xn.8957

Research rationale:

The Study is being undertaken for a PhD qualification, through Massey University and is the result of an ongoing interest in maternal support. The researcher worked for many years in early childhood centres and became interested in the experiences of mothers as a result of their belonging to a centre. Indications are that as well as the traditional provision of education for children and "time out" for parents, centres also serve other purposes for families. However, there is little documented about these possible benefits, and particularly not from a mother's viewpoint.

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Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

Inception to Infinity: Massey University's commitment to learning as a life-long journey

Study Procedures:

Access will be sought by the researcher to four different types of early childhood centres, through their management. The researcher will ask to distribute information sheets to all mothers in your/the centre for their interest, and those who meet specific criteria can as a result register interest in becoming involved with the research. This will entail agreeing to be interviewed twice and criteria for choosing mothers are: first time mothers whose main occupation is in the home, and who only attend one centre. Interviews will take approximately one hour. At the same time mothers will be requested to keep a diary for six months (which will entail very short entries weekly, or even less, as significant centre-related events occur). The second interview will be with the same mothers, after six months , using the diaries for recall (approximately one hour). Two staff members from each centre will also be interviewed once, for the researcher to gain an understanding of their perception of the role of the centre with regard to maternal support.

It will be useful for the researcher to also have access to documents such as the Charter of the centre in order to gain a better understanding of the intent of the centre with regard to maternal (family) support.

At the same time observations will be done to document the centre's provision for parent resources and space and the frequency and nature of parent involvement. This will entail field notes being taken of the ways centres have found to communicate with parents, through noticeboards, newsletters,and informal feedback. Also noted will be places where parents can sit, meet and borrow books or read information. As well the researcher would like to attend any centre meetings for parent support and education.

All the information will be written up in four case studies. No names will be mentioned and care will be taken in terms of confidentiality, such that neither centres nor individuals are identifiable.

After the data has been analysed and written up, you will receive a summary of results.

The research process:

After you have read this information sheet the researcher will phone to find out if you are agreeable for your organisation to take part in the research. If you give consent then the researcher will offer to meet with you to answer any questions you might have and to ask you to sign a consent form indicating you have agreed for your organisation to become involved. The consent form will set out the details of your rights as an organisation participating in research. Your involvement will be valued, both for what it contributes to the study, as well as for the knowledge it contributes to the wider context of research.

Thank you for reading this request, I look forward to meeting with you.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 12/25. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University Regional Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5249, email S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz.

Note the following was appendicised:
"Your consent to participate in this research is voluntary, however, permission has been gained to approach the management of your centre from the central organisation of the Auckland Kindergarten Association."

APPENDIX C.

Form for organisational consent:

Title of the project: Support for mothers in early childhood centres.

Principal investigator: Ms Avril Thesing

Name of organisation:

- I have read details of the above research project.

- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it, which have been answered to my satisfaction, and have the right to ask further questions at any time.

- I understand the organisation's consent to the project may be withdrawn, at any time up until data analysis. This includes, both persons involved, as well as their information.

- I am assured any information that is given will be treated with respect and confidentiality, and no names will be used in the final thesis. At the same time this information will not be used for any purpose beyond that for which consent is given.

- I understand that the participants in this research will be individually approached for their informed consent.

- I agree on behalf of the organisation that observations may be done to ascertain ways the centre communicates with, supports and facilitates parents.

- I agree that the researcher may attend any parent education or support meetings held at the centre.

- I give permission for centre documentation, such as the Charter to be consulted with regard to policies for parent support and facilitation.

- I consent to members of this organisation taking part in the research, as it has been set out in the information sheet.

Signed:_____

Name

Date

APPENDIX D.

Information sheet for gaining maternal consent to be a research participant:

Project title: Support for mothers in early childhood centres.

Researcher: Avril Thesing
Researcher details: Telephone (09) 623 8899 Xn 8396

Supervisors:

Professor Joy Cullen, Learning and Teaching, Massey University, Palmerston North (06) 351 3355, or freephone Albany campus (09) 443 9700 Xn.8955.

Dr.Judith Loveridge, Learning and Teaching, Massey University, Palmerston North (06) 351 3357, or freephone Albany campus (09) 443 9700 Xn.8957

Research rationale:

The Study is being undertaken for a PhD qualification, through Massey University and is the result of an ongoing interest in maternal support. The researcher worked for many years in early childhood centres and became interested in the experiences of mothers as a result of their belonging to a centre. Indications are that as well as the traditional provision of education for children and "time out" for parents, centres also serve other purposes for families. However, there is little documented about these possible benefits, and particularly not from a mother's viewpoint.

Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

Inception to Infinity: Massey University's commitment to learning as a life-long journey

Study Procedures:

The researcher would like to talk to mothers and staff about their experiences of maternal support, and parent education. Therefore access has been sought by the researcher to four different types of early childhood centres, through their management. Permission has been given for distribution of information sheets to all mothers in the centre for their interest. At the same time they are invited to contact the researcher with a view to being a participant in the project if the following criteria apply to you: you are a first time mother, who has recently enrolled in the centre, (up to a month), whose main occupation is in the home, and you only attend one centre. Interviews will take approximately one hour. To be a participant you would need to agree to be interviewed twice, immediately, and then in six months, during which time you will be asked to keep a diary (which will entail very short entries weekly, or even less, as and if significant centre-related events occur). The researcher will make copies of this twice during the six months and discuss it with you during the second interview (one hour). Two staff members from each centre will also be interviewed once, for the researcher to gain an understanding of their perception of the role of the centre with regard to maternal support.

It will be useful for the researcher to also have access to documents such as the Charter of the centre in order to gain a better understanding of the intent of the centre with regard to maternal (family) support.

At the same time observations will be done to ascertain centre facilities in terms of parent space, resources and involvement. This will entail notes being taken of the ways centres have found to communicate with parents, through noticeboards, newsletters, and informal feedback. Also noted will be places where parents can sit, meet and borrow books or read information. As well the researcher would like to attend any centre meetings for parent support and education.

If you agree to be interviewed the researcher would like to tape record this, and transcripts of your interview will be returned to you for your approval before being used. Diaries will be returned to you permanently, after the researcher has made a copy. All information which is kept during the project will only be accessible to the researcher, and will eventually be destroyed. The final thesis will not contain names or any features which may identify you or your centre. You can refuse to answer any questions, you can ask questions at any time and you may withdraw your information or yourself from the study at any time up until the point of data analysis. You will eventually receive a summary of the findings in appreciation of your involvement.

If you would like to participate please complete the following and return the slip indicating interest in the stamped addressed envelope. You will shortly receive a call from the researcher to explain the next step which can be either a social meeting, or the interview itself. If you agree to be interviewed you will be asked to sign a consent form which sets out your rights as a research participant.

I look forward to hearing from you.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 12/25. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University Regional Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5249, email S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz.

Please return this into the box provided if you would like to express interest, in which case the researcher will call you.

I have read the information provided and believe I fit the criteria, I should like to discuss further becoming a participant in the research.

Name

Telephone number   **Centre**

APPENDIX E.

Consent form for individual participant:

Title of the project: Support for mothers in early childhood centres.

Principal investigator: Ms Avril Thesing

- I have read details of the above research project that I have been invited to take part in.

- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it, which have been answered to my satisfaction, and have the right to ask further questions at any time.

- I understand that my consent to being involved in the project may be withdrawn, at any time up until data analysis. This includes withdrawal of any information I have given.

- I am assured any information that is given will be treated with respect and confidentiality, and no names will be used in the final thesis. At the same time this information will not be used for any purpose beyond that for which consent is given.

- I have agreed/not agreed to this interview being tape recorded, and reserve the right to ask for it to be turned off at any time.

- I consent to taking part in the research, as it has been set out in the information sheet.

Signed:_____**Name**_____

Date

APPENDIX F.

Mothers' first interview schedule:
(Includes researcher's prompts).

The mothers

1 **Would you like to begin by telling me about you and your family and how you became associated with this centre**? (Probes: why choose this centre/how did you know about it/local community?)

2 **Tell me something about your reasons for belonging to an early childhood centre? You came for education for your child and companionship for yourself, have you found anything else?** (Probes: main purposes/for child/for mother/regular attendance/expectations fulfilled so far?)

3 **Describe your experiences when you and your child were settling into the centre.** (Probes what helped/detracted/Centre procedures/sessions/staff/other mothers/child)?

4 **Tell me about any help or support you have received since you joined the centre**?
   a) for yourself?
   b) for your child?
(Probes: what type of help?)

5 **What other types of support do you think would be helpful for mothers in the centre?** (Probes: settling in/introduction to others/from staff/from other mothers/other services?)

6   **If you think you would ever approach staff for personal help, (beyond issues relating to your child), what type of problems would you want to discuss/if not why not?** (Your own health, everyday problems, future/past career/furthering education/other mothers?)

7   **What do you think you might learn informally just from attending the centre?** (Probes: useful information/ "how to"/developmental stages/behaviour management/networking/parenting solutions?)

8a **Where do you think this knowledge/information might come from?** (Probes: teacher tells/teacher models/peer tells/peer models/ verbal/observing other children/written information in centre/what is the **most useful written information**

8b **How useful are newsletters/information sent out?** (Probes: Do you read them? Do you discuss them with others, whom, do you keep them, changed anything as a result?

9   **How useful do you think are the formal parent education evenings/seminars held at the centre**? (Probes: do you go, why not? /more, less useful than informally in centre/recommendations for improvement/making it easy to attend/useful topics/parents' role/staff role in session/how frequently?)

10 **What roles are there for mothers at the centre?** (Probes: jobs/opportunities for sharing expertise/valuing parents involvement/using initiative/how do mothers get into these roles?)

11 **Give a thumbnail sketch of how your life has changed since you became a mother?** (Probes: changes with regard to work/hobbies/family/relationships)

12 Would you tell me some of the ways in which you have coped with these changes? (Probes: places/**people that give support** and pleasure outside centre contacts/**family how many friends**/health professionals/sport/library/hobbies?)

Relationships with other parents:

13 Tell me about your experiences so far of meeting other parents at the centre? (Probes: Any new friends/what happened/special meeting, how did you meet, what was the outcome/how useful/how dealt with it/ongoing expectations?)

14 What are some of the ways the centre tries to make it easier for mothers to make friends? (Probes: physical environment set up suitably/staff facilitation/centre procedures for meeting/barriers/recommendations?)

15 Tell me about anything you think you might learn from other parents? (Probes: how/what learned/why useful/how different compared with from teachers?)

Centre culture:

16 Describe what is user-friendly about the centre? What do you like, dislike?(Probes: things provided/information/community centre/services/professional services/entertainment/parent space/library?)

17 Do you know anything about how useful the Early Childhood Curriculum Te Whaariki, is in helping centres support/develop partnerships with families? (Probes: what is it/what know about it/what tries to do/how evident?)

18 Do you have anything else that we might not have discussed you would like to tell me about centre support for mothers?

APPENDIX G.

Diary.

Diary information:

An important aim in this study is to find out what early childhood centres do to support mothers.

Over six months of being a member you will know the centre better, and your ideas may change over time with the experiences you will have. It is not usual to remember the ordinary, everyday details of our lives beyond a few days, therefore this diary will be useful in reminding you of events when we meet in six months.

It is not intended that you spend a lot of time writing. You can write as little or as much as you wish. You may record a few words weekly, or it may be that you do not record anything for several weeks.

Directions:

So that the diary is useful for us to talk about when we meet at the second interview the researcher will contact you at two monthly intervals to copy what you have written and return the diary. That will also be a good time to discuss any problems you might have.

Please record in the diary (on the date that it happened), any significant events which happened to you and gave you a lift as a result of being a member of your early childhood centre. It may be something that happened at the centre like you arranging an activity you developed for the children. It may also be something that happened outside the centre, but was a result of you belonging to the centre, like meeting one of the other mums for lunch. Here are some examples, but you will have many other experiences:

Examples:

At the centre:

Talked with mother, who I really liked, at the sandpit

Won a raffle held at the centre raffle

Found a book with useful parenting information

Was voted onto the Committee as librarian

Outside the centre;

Met one of the other mums for lunch

Enrolled in a babysitting club some of the mothers use

Followed up information on a course about parenting

Set up fundraising stall in the village

- If you forget about the diary, don't worry just continue on with it again when you remember, just make a note there is a gap.

- Please bring it with you to the second interview so that we can discuss the events. I would like to take a copy, and then return it to you permanently.

Examples (It may be a large event, it may be small):

1	The event, describe what happened:
Date: 25th July **Who was involved with you?:** Two other mothers, Jean and Maxine	Jean and Maxine who are good friends outside Kindy have started a babysitting club. I was sitting very close to them at the sandpit, and they were talking about it, Jean leaned over and said how about you Cherry would you like to belong? She explained how it worked and I agreed to join, so I can go to tennis now on Wednesdays, which I couldn't do before.
2	The event, describe what happened:
Date: 3rd August **Who was involved with you?** One of the teachers	The teacher saw the new bag I had made for Sean's lunch, and remarked on what lovely applique I can do, it made me feel good about my accomplishments, especially as I don't have much time for hobbies now.

APPENDIX H.

Confidentiality agreement for transcribers:

Research Project: Support of mothers in early childhood settings.

I,_____(Transcriber) agree to keep all information derived from my participation in the "Support of mothers in early childhood settings" project confidential to myself and the Principal researcher, Avril Thesing.

I also agree to take all possible precautions at every stage of research to guarantee the anonymity of participants as indicated in their Consent Forms.

This undertaking includes all aspects of the gathering, handling, storage and publication of research materials during and subsequent to the research.

Avril J. Thesing
Principal researcher

Date:

Transcriber_____
(Signature)

Date:

APPENDIX I.

Mothers' second interview:
(Includes researcher's prompts).

The mothers

1 **Tell me about how things have been for you since we first met?** (Probes: anything changed, if changed how changed, to what are the changes attributed, how feel about changes, if any?)

2 **How have things been for your child?** (Probe: anything changed, how changed, to what are changes attributed?)

3 **Have your expectations of the centre been met, and have there been any unanticipated benefits?**

4 **Tell me about any help and support you have received whilst you have been a member of the centre over the last six months?**

5 **To what extent do you believe getting to know the staff better has been helpful in terms of gaining support?** (Probe: personal help, parenting problems).

6 **Describe any ways you have benefited by the parent education evenings/seminars/informal learning situations provided by the centre?**

7 **To what extent has the centre helped you to understand your role as a parent?** (Probe: why/why not).

8 **If you have taken on any new roles at the centre, please explain how this**

happened and what this means to you? (Probe: Committee/responsibility/new mothers/roster).

9   While you have been at the centre have you started any new hobbies, study, or paid employment? (Probe: How did this happen, how has it benefitted you?)

10 Tell me about ways you personally have been able to contribute to the life of the centre?

11 Do you think you have in any way changed as a person as a result of being a centre member? (Probe: How have you changed, how did this happen, who/what helped you, parent education sessions useful, why/why not?)

Relationships with other parents

12 Tell me about how important it has been to make friends at the centre? (Probe: How easy/not easy, how did it happen, do together, at the centre/outside, explain any difference this has made to your life?)

13 Tell me about any memorable social/other events that have been organised at the centre and why it/they was/were special occasions? (Probe: organised by whom/how)

14 What have been some of the benefits you have gained specifically through meeting and making friends with, other mothers?

15 Would you like to talk about what you might have written in your diary? (Probe: Shall we go from the beginning, what was the first entry you made, what do you feel about those early days now?)

Centre culture

16 After all the experiences you have had so far in the centre, what recommendations do you have for other mothers to gain the most from their experiences and opportunities in early childhood centres?

17 What would you like to say to teachers about supporting the needs of mothers generally in centres? (Probe: Anything still hoping for, wished they knew?)

18 What would you like to tell your friends about the centre you attend as a place to meet in the community apart from it being a place for children to play, learn, and be cared for?)

19 What do you think you might miss when you eventually leave the centre?

20 What aspect of your involvement with the centre has influenced you the most?

APPENDIX J.

Information sheet for gaining staff consent to be a research participant:

Project title: Support for mothers in early childhood centres.

Researcher: Avril Thesing

Researcher details: Telephone (09) 623 8899 Xn 8396

Supervisors:

Professor Joy Cullen, Learning and Teaching, Massey University, Palmerston North (06) 351 3355, or freephone Albany campus (09) 443 9700 Xn.8955.

Dr.Judith Loveridge, Learning and Teaching, Massey University, Palmerston North (06) 351 3357, or freephone Albany campus (09) 443 9700 Xn.8957

Research rationale:

The Study is being undertaken for a PhD qualification, through Massey University and is the result of an ongoing interest in maternal support. The researcher worked for many years in early childhood centres and became interested in the experiences of mothers as a result of their belonging to a centre. Indications are that as well as the traditional provision of education for children and "time out" for parents, centres also serve other purposes for families. However, there is little documented about these possible benefits, and particularly not from a mother's viewpoint.

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Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

Study Procedures:

The researcher would like to talk to staff and mothers about their experiences of maternal support, and parent education. Therefore access has been sought by the researcher to four different types of early childhood centres, through their management. Permission has been given for distribution of information sheets to all mothers in the centre for their interest. At the same time they are invited to contact the researcher with a view to being a participant in the project if they meet the following criteria: being a first time mother, who has recently enrolled in the centre, (up to a month), whose main occupation is in the home, and only attending one centre. Interviews will take approximately one hour, mothers will be interviewed twice, six months apart, and be asked to keep a diary in the interim period. The researcher would like to also interview at least two members of the teaching team at the centre in order to understand how they view both their role and that of the centre with regard to maternal support and parent education. Staff would be interviewed only once. It is expected this would take approximately an hour.

The researcher will also request access to documents such as the Charter of the centre in order to gain a better understanding of the intent of the centre with regard to maternal (family) support.

At the same time observations will be done to ascertain centre facilities in terms of parent space, resources and involvement. This will entail notes being taken of the ways centres have found to communicate with parents, through noticeboards, newsletters, and informal feedback. Also noted will be places where parents can sit, meet and borrow books or read information. As well the researcher would like to attend any centre meetings for parent support and education.

If you agree to be interviewed the researcher would like to tape record this, and transcripts of your interview will be returned to you for your approval before being used. All information which is kept during the project will only be accessible to the researcher,

and will eventually be destroyed. The final thesis will not contain names or any features which may identify you or your centre. You can refuse to answer any questions, you can ask questions at any time and you may withdraw your information or yourself from the study at any time up until the point of data analysis. You will eventually receive a summary of the findings in appreciation of your involvement.

The researcher will call you shortly to ascertain any staff interest in being interviewed.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 12/25. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University Regional Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5249, email S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz.

APPENDIX K.

Staff interview schedule:

(Includes researcher's prompts).

Staff

1   **Would you like to begin by telling me something about your position here at the centre?** (Probes: how came to centre/live in the community/previous experience/present role?)

Mothers

2   **Please describe the benefits for mothers in belonging to an early childhood centre?** (Probes: why belong/for child/for parent?)

3   **Describe what procedures/information there are in place to help new mothers/parents to settle into the centre culture?** (Probes: understand roles/know what to do, where things are/information services/interviews/home visits/peer support).

4   **How far do you believe the centre has a role and an obligation to support mothers (families) and what are some of the support features available?** (Probes: parenting skills/behaviour management/developmental stages/information/services/activities?).

5   **Are there any additional types of support you can suggest that would benefit mothers which you would like to see operating in the centre?** (Probes: why/from staff/from other mothers/other services?)

5a **What would be your attitude to being approached by mothers for help about personal matters or topics outside parenting and child issues?** (Probes: What help offered/staff personal beliefs/centre policy).

5b **Where mothers do ask for help, tell me about any recurrent themes which come up that they want to talk about?)** (Probes: separation from child/child health/special needs/parenting issues/personal health/personal problems?).

5c **Where a mother does not come to you for help, yet appears to be distressed/need support describe what you would do?** (Probes: ignore/wait a day or two/how initiate an approach /discuss matters/where refer H/T/outside services/information/follow up?).

6 **What do you think mothers might learn informally just from attending the centre?** (Probes: useful information/ "how to"/developmental stages/behaviour management/networking/parenting solutions?)

7 **Where do you think this knowledge/information might come from?** (Probes: teacher tells/teacher models/peer tells/peer models/verbal/written information in centre)?

8 **How useful do you think are the formal parent education evenings/seminars held at the centre?** (Probes: why/attendance/learn more, as much, less than informally/recommendations for improvement/ making it easy to attend/useful topics/type of session/parents' role/staff role in session/how frequently held/parents consulted on topics?).

9 **What are the roles for mothers in the centre?** (Probes: Type, regular jobs/opportunities for sharing expertise/valuing parents' involvement/using initiative/how do mothers get into these roles?).

10   **What are some of the issues women have to deal with when they become mothers** (Probes: Loss of freedom/friendships/networks/career/time factors/loss of finance/gains new networks/interests/ "baby careers" how manifested at the centre?)

11   **What are some of the ways you think mothers use to cope with these changes?**(Probes: places/people which give support and pleasure outside centre contacts/family/health professionals/sport/library/hobbies how manifested at the centre?)

12   **Are there any ways the centre recognises and tries to support these changed circumstances/finding new directions/mothers' changing needs over time?** (Probes: Formal/informal approaches/individual chats/information/community networks)

13   **Is there anything else we might not have discussed that you would like to tell me about supporting mothers in the centre?**

14   **What do you hope mothers will take with them from their experience at the centre when they leave?**

Relationships with other parents:

15   **How important is it do you believe for mothers to meet other parents socially?** (Probes: why useful/advantages).

16   **Describe ways in which mothers can meet other people in the centre and develop friendships**? (Probes: formal/informal social arrangements/parent space/physical environment set up suitably /duties/babysitting/local community).

17   **What do you think mothers might learn from each other?** (Probes: how/what learned/why useful/how different compared with from teachers?)

Centre culture:

18   **Describe what is user-friendly about the centre ?** (Probes: things provided/information/community centred/services/professional services/entertainment/parent space/library?)

19   **Do you know anything about how useful the Early Childhood Curriculum/ Te Whaariki, is in helping centres support/develop partnerships with families?** (Probes: what is it/what know about it/what tries to do/how evident?)

19 **Do you have any suggestions or recommendations to improve centre support for mothers?** (Probes: parent space/culture/information/access/ teachers/children/other parents?)

APPENDIX L.

Coding and analysis of interviews:

The lengthy process of reduction from the open coding of themes to the final set of six propositions was undertaken for each interview as well as the diary responses. (See Figure 2, p.106 in the Methodology, chapter three for the process of development). The following represents an example of one aspect of that process:

Data was coded as soon as an interview had been transcribed in the logical order of the questions asked:

Mothers' interview 1, question 14
Would you tell me some of the ways in which you have coped with these changes?

The responses were first open coded into tables where the major themes were identified. They were then subjected to axial coding where key concepts were found. These were then highlighted in the tables as bolded statements, as for example in:

Mothers' reported ways of coping with changes in their lives since becoming mothers through: *(This title shows the selective coding stage where the conclusion was drawn that mothers' support was a result of their **own active response** and coping strategies).*

Maintaining a positive attitude *(Bolded text shows the axial coding stage where key ideas are identified)*
Striving for same long term life goals/planning ahead before the birth/mortgages *(Unbolded text shows the original open coding for themes)*
Continuing sport/dancing/employment/pre-birth interests
Adjusting actively to change
Seeking new experiences and selectively embracing advantages

Adjusting as quickly as possible to new regimes
Accepting new limitations and finding ways to deal with them
Gaining/maintaining relationships within personal support networks
Becoming a member of an early childhood centre
Seeking family support/parents/siblings
Seeking local community services
Socialising with friends at work
Meeting mothers from ante-natal/Plunket coffee groups regularly for coffee
Meeting new parents at the Centre
Making friends with mothers who enrolled at the same time
Joining the Centre with a group of friends
Inviting children to play with their mothers
Retaining financial independence
Working part time
Working shift work
Pre-planning to save for mortgage in anticipation of financial restrictions with one wage
Taking timeout/arranging uplifts
Arranging babysitters regularly to go out with husband, parents/in laws
Gaining confidence in newfound interests around parenting
Doing study/parenting courses
Joining the library
Pottering in the garden
Adopting a new sport
Taking advantage of childcare
Planning ahead, finances

Summary of table:

Mothers described how they had adjusted to their new lifestyle since the birth of a child
by: retaining positive attitudes, gaining/maintaining relationships within personal
support, retaining financial independence and taking timeout/arranging uplifts.

A feature of mothers' suggested ways of coping showed evidence of an active response to gaining support.

Mothers' voice through related quotations for use in reporting results:

Stephanie described the fortitude required to respond positively to the experience of motherhood and joining a centre:

> *I can't believe it was so hard, it was hard. I think mothers who work (and have) children must be the most organised people in the world. I don't know how they do it. How can they be so organised? I knew a friend who worked three days a week did a thesis and moved house in about the last year. I just couldn't put myself through that...but she's structured, she's a structured person*

Stephanie had eventually joined a playcentre for *her child's* stimulation, but found it had been a fortunate decision that gave her another important dimension to her life, where she gained both fulfilment and support. At the same time it had been a considerable challenge and she had felt further accountable for reasons of commitment to the group. She said:

> *Playcentre isn't for everybody. I don't think it is. I think you have to have the commitment and I think you actually have to be quite resourced. Some people have to feel comfortable in (what they do). You see its taking her and you have to be there for 9.00 am, you have to, and for most people that means having a vehicle, its not totally suitable, I mean if there are meetings in the evenings you have to attend two out of three or something, half of them anyway.*

Stephanie had originally had a career and had planned ahead she: *started saving money so that I had some money for that first year of my own.* Shirley (Pp) was a mature mother who had waited ten years for her only daughter *it took ten years to happen so she's quite a treasure. It was hectic and now sort of lovely.* Like Stephanie there had been financial

issues to adjust to. *Its quite a major adjustment going from two to one income but we're managing sometimes its only just but not to make me want to go back into the workforce.*

Rosa explained how she had hoped to continue working and combine this with motherhood with the support of family, this being a cultural expectation: *In Sri Lanka we have to leave the child and work.* She eventually gave up work to become a fulltime mother and had found involvement an important experience.:

> *I was working until late in the night before I had him, but after I couldn't work like that. He was OK. He was with my parents. I couldn't work like in the early days. I actually enjoyed coming home early. The first three months were awful. Everybody was telling me you won't have enough sleep, but I didn't realise it until I had him. There we were not even allowed to come into the classes but here everybody is in. I think it is a good thing that you (can) come and help.*

Lauren had also worked fulltime by necessity. She relied on childcare to allow this. She said:

> *Well being the mother was the easy part. Living with an abusive partner was the hard part...The early time of (having) Mary was marred by my partner being abusive and I was always worried about him and what he was doing.*

She became a solo parent and did a short business course and *Mary was in daycare from then. I can't have her here when I do my business if I want to succeed.* Lauren spoke of more recent support in her life: *My new partner Phil, he's just so wonderful with children.*

Wenda, (Pp) talked of her loneliness and need to:

> *...be able to go off and do stuff, almost like a creche situation...there's really nothing around this immediate area. You don't get two minutes for yourself*

really...Sometimes you feel like you would like to have a couple of days off, but that's never going to happen.

She said she had joined several Playgroups that she attended simultaneously for adult company *because you have to fill your days.* She said *reading was about all I got time for* and she had joined the library. Nina (CK) likewise had coped with early motherhood by*:*

> *...joining the library, when John was a baby and went up there and got books but I've stopped doing that lately because between my two jobs I don't find the time but gardening and things I love pottering in the garden.*

Wenda explained how she had adjusted to having her son, and the resultant rewards:

> *Its not really about me (now) its about him and whatever is good for him. I've had my go at life and now its his turn and I'm doing everything I can to make his life great. That is what it feels like. She described how in her perception her husband still had to make this shift Is this a woman's role too? I say that to my husband. He says Oh, I want to go out with my friends, wish I could do that...the regretting of the boyhood because he really was a boy until he had him (their son) actually. I said to him, no its about him (the son) now. She then said although having her son was a little restricting, she said "The love you get back is so worth it. He (the son) gives me more love than my husband does, tenfold, and its unconditional, there's no strings attached...Its just wonderful"*

Nina had found the adjustment very difficult and had relied very much on her family at the time:

> *Mum and Dad are really good if we do want to go out for tea or movies or anything they are always available. If it wasn't for (mum) when John was a baby*

I think I would have gone nuts because Gerry's parents were overseas on holiday and he works for his parents so he was there looking after things.

She had *also had a coffee group through ante natal classes and we used to meet up every fortnight.* Another support had been her part-time work:

Just two nights a week for shopping money, like grocery money and meeting people...I knew they did night work, because I did not want to leave John at night. The girls in there a lot of them I worked with in branches years ago and now they're all mums and its good, you'll go in some nights and I'll be down or upset because I've had an argument with the hubby or the kid and we'll all cheer each other up and have a laugh.

Martel (P) had also continued to find her work important after she became a mother. She continued part-time through the support of her partner and they had organised a workable arrangement:

My partner works from home in the afternoon until one in the morning, its hard on him if I do too many days so that's why playcentre is so good...we get home at lunch and he's had all that morning by himself to sleep in.

Martel had very clear goals. *My goal is to be a general manager by the time I'm 40*, and was fortunate that *I can basically go in whenever I want.* She said:

I've grown up a lot...I used to go out quite a lot and party. Now I'd rather stay at home and watch a good video, I'm so tired. Mum and Dad are only three quarters of an hour away if ever we need them...(but) we haven't really used them at all.

Tilly (CK) had found the centre helpful, she said:

> *I think coming here has supported (the changes in my life) because he can go and play and it's good for him and it's good for me, but other than that I've got a really supportive family so it's always been pretty good.*

Ailly (P) by her own admission:

> *...had done everything, being a farm girl I was born on my feet and became extremely athletic in my teens. I have basically run two marathons in a weekend...I was doing it for fun and fitness and just to push myself ...because the human body can do anything. I've always been strongly disciplined and forced (myself) to do things. I've found that I've always thrown myself in and (don't) do anything half heartedly and really come through the other side the better for it.*

She had continued a disciplined approach to her sport since having her baby pushing him all over the neighbourhood, *I've worn out these buggy bearings in two and a half years,* but had adapted this to her present capabilities. She said: *We've got a dance class now and healthy hours down at our gym.*

Responses to all questions were subjected to the above process.

APPENDIX M.

Coding and analysis of diary entries:

Mothers were asked to identify "significant events" by making a diary entry whenever they happened, and commenting as they wished. Responses were coded by being tabulated into themes as for the interview coding. These were then used to support the interview data. The following table is an example of the process:

Mothers' identification of the supportive events they experienced. *(Shows selective coding from conclusion drawn by table title).*

Gained satisfaction from committee type roles *(example of axial coding stage)*
Joined the Committee *(example of open coding stage)*
Offered to be health and safety officer
Undertook to take on first aid certificate for this
Offered to take on secretarial role
Enjoyed ownership of secretarial role
Offered to be librarian
Devised way of improving stocktaking the books
Took on the role of equipment officer
Found way of improving the equipment stock take
Offered to be part of fundraising team
Gained satisfaction through incidental uplifts
Rocked another mother's child to sleep in pushchair
Resolved conflict between two child for a new mother
Set up the new centre slide
Felt proud friend's child started to talk as result of challenge by own child
Gained satisfaction through incidental maintenance and cleaning opportunities
Undertook to be part of cleaning bee (3)

Undertook to be part of the working bee
Gained satisfaction through teaching opportunities as result of playcentre training
Planned and conducted planting activity with children
Conducted a very successful messy play session
Worked out how to use spare wire in construction
Devised a new way of setting up the blocks
Gained satisfaction through social opportunity
Appointed buddy to a new member of the centre
Gained satisfaction through self appointed roles
Self-initiated role of 'centre problem solver'
Button collector for collage

APPENDIX N.

Propositions:

The propositions used to express the theory developed within the study went through a process of reduction and refinement. These were the original 12 before they were reduced to six *(The process of this reduction is described in Figure 2 in the Methodology Chapter three page 90):*

Proposition 1
Although mothers' initial motivation in joining an early childhood centre is for the benefit of their child, their membership is actually established upon the basis of their social satisfaction with a centre.

Proposition 2
Familiarity with the culture of their centre is crucial before mothers are able to extract any benefits from their membership.

Proposition 3
Support is conditional upon the development of relationships of trust at different levels within the centre community.

Proposition 4
Mothers receive most support benefits as a result of unplanned interactions with members of their early childhood centre communities.

Proposition 5
Information is a major aspect of the support received by mothers.

Proposition 6
Support is contingent upon the active contribution by mothers.

Proposition 7

Mothers' changing needs are supported as a result of their experiences as members of an early childhood centre.

Proposition 8

Staff attitudes and expectations about the centre structure and their perceive role are major determinants of the degree to which formal support is promoted.

Proposition 9

Teachers have considerable empathy for the difficulties of motherhood in recognition of their own experiences as mothers.

Proposition 10

Lack of power sharing by teachers reduces the effectiveness of centres as communities of learning.

Proposition 11

Teachers' and mothers' definitions of support differ.

Proposition 12

Divergent perspectives of teachers and parents mean that they ascribe value to different types of knowledge.

APPENDIX O.

Information sheet for participant consent to be a research participant in a focus group:

Project title: Support for mothers in early childhood centres.

Researcher: Avril Thesing

Researcher details: Telephone (09) 623 8899 Xn 48396

Supervisors:

Professor Joy Cullen, Learning and Teaching, Massey University, Palmerston North (06) 351 3355, or freephone Albany campus (09) 443 9700 Xn.8955.

Dr.Judith Loveridge, Learning and Teaching, Massey University, Palmerston North (06) 351 3357, or freephone Albany campus (09) 443 9700 Xn.8957

Research rationale:

This study is being undertaken for a PhD qualification, through Massey University and is the result of an ongoing interest in maternal support. The researcher worked for many years in early childhood centres and became interested in the experiences of mothers as a result of their belonging to a centre. Indications are that as well as the traditional provision of education for children and "time out" for parents, centres also serve other purposes for families. However, there is little documented about these possible benefits, and particularly not from a mother's viewpoint.

Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

Verification of data interpretation study procedures:

The researcher is in the final stages of completing this study and would like to talk to a group of staff and a separate group of mothers in two focus groups in order to gauge their impressions of the researcher's interpretation of the final analysis of her data. The researcher will present a short summary of the findings to be debated and verified by the two individual groups from their particular perspectives. This will add increased validity to the results and a further dimension to a qualitative methodology.

Permission has been given by the University Research Ethics Committee to approach a group of teachers and mothers for this purpose. If you agree to be part of the group interview the researcher will ask you to sign a consent form at the time of the focus group discussion. Focus groups will take approximately one hour. All information gained as a result of the focus groups will only be accessible to the researcher, and will eventually be destroyed. The final thesis will not contain names or any features which may identify you or your centre. Whilst your contribution would be appreciated your participation is entirely voluntary.

The researcher will call you shortly if you have shown an interest in being a participant in the group interview, to discuss the arrangements for meeting.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 12/25. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University Regional Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5249, email S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz.

APPENDIX P.

Consent form for individual participant of focus group:

Title of the project: Support for mothers in early childhood centres.

Principal investigator: Ms Avril Thesing

- I have read details of the proposed verification of data from the above research project that I have been invited to take part in.

- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it, which have been answered to my satisfaction, and have the right to ask further questions at any time.

- I am assured any information that is given will be treated with respect and confidentiality, and no names will be used in the final thesis. At the same time this information will not be used for any purpose beyond that for which consent is given.

- I consent to taking part in the focus group, as it has been set out in the information sheet.

Signed:_____Name_____

Date

APPENDIX Q.

Focus group interviews:

Two separate focus groups (one for mothers and another for early childhood teachers outside the original sample) were convened for the purpose of verification of the researcher's interpretation of the study data. In order to inform the group interview, prior to the discussion, the researcher conducted a short presentation of the findings, as they related to centre facilitation of formal and informal support. For this purpose an overhead transparency was made of figure 4, in Discussion: Chapter seven, page 238. The researcher then asked the participants for their opinion on her interpretation of the results. The following is a summary of the findings that was presented to the focus groups as a discussion overhead:

SUPPORT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES

(Initially a definition was presented and discussed):

SUPPORT = The **help and information** that mothers gain for themselves and their child from teachers and other mothers **through being involved** in early childhood centre networks.

IT HAS BEEN SUGGESTED THAT MOTHERS ACTIVELY GAINED SUPPORT IN TWO WAYS:

FORMAL PLANNED SUPPORT   **INFORMAL UNPLANNED SUPPORT**
(By teachers)   (By other mothers and teachers)

SUPPORT IS DETERMINED BY RELATIONSHIPS

Professional: teacher/mother   Equal power-base
Planned social functions   Teachers put themselves in a mother role

Teachers introduce mothers

Teachers introduce mothers

Catalysts for friendships

Friendships then go outside the centre

COMMUNICATION DETERMINES THE QUALITY OF SUPPORT

Professional advice

Ordinary discussion/conversation

Emphasis on educational topics

Wide range of topics

Written rather than verbal material

CONTRIBUTION OPPORTUNITIES DETERMINE MOTHERS' ABILITY TO ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE WITHIN THE CENTRE COMMUNITY

Teachers give out jobs

Help and support where needed

Rostered duties

Domestic except committee

Playcentre supervision

TEACHERS AND MOTHERS HAD DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS OF SUPPORT

Educational information

Learn by discussion/questions

Newsletters/notices/books/pamphlets

Learn by observing teachers/mothers

Parent education seminars

Learn by being able to choose advice

Playcentre training

through a range of different opinions