

Central character story:

***Weaving families and their stories
into children's learning in early childhood education***



***Kidsfirst Kindertartens Bush Street
Centre of Innovation - 2006-08***

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Cover photo



The picture on the cover is important because it depicts parent-child involvement at Bush Street. It shows a parent involved with her child in an episode of the Mother Goose story (term 3 2007).

This story revolves around children and parents' routines at mat time. We like to involve parents in central character stories when possible.

Melissa (the parent) had told us she likes to have some "time out" from her parenting role while her son is at Kindergarten. We invited her to join in by sharing a bed time story with us as part of the central character story. Initially she was cautious and came to watch another story before she said, "yes." After taking part in a story, Melissa realised that she enjoyed being in the Kindergarten and that her involvement had a positive effect on her relationship with her son.

In chapter 3 we explain how central character stories allow us to involve children and parents in the life of the kindergarten.

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Contents

Chapter 1 Introducing the project, kindergarten, authors and key ideas.....	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Introducing Kidsfirst Kindertagens Bush Street.....	2
1.3 <i>Te Whāriki</i> , curriculum and story	3
1.4 The path to becoming a Centre of Innovation (COI)	3
1.5 The research collective: Children, parents, whānau, community	4
1.6 The culture of adaptation and the research process	4
1.7 Research questions.....	4
Chapter 2 Story in Early Childhood Education.....	5
2.1 Introduction	5
2.2 Story	5
2.3 Stories found in society and culture.....	6
2.4 Stories found in books	6
2.5 Creating an environment for stories.....	7
Common Threads of Learning	10
2.6 We write our own stories	11
2.7 Personal Stories	12
2.8 Summary.....	13
Chapter 3 Central character.....	14
3.1 Introduction	14
3.2 Central character.....	14
3.3 Where this idea came from and how it evolved.....	14
3.4 Meet the central characters in our research.....	16
3.5 The central character stories are part of day-to-day teaching and learning.....	19
3.6 How we develop a central character	20
3.7 How the story of a central character is introduced.....	21
3.8 An insight – the metaphor of theatre-sports (a form of improvisational theatre).....	23
3.9 Mood, ‘magic’ and spirituality	24
3.10 What the central character story enables us to do.....	25
3.11 Summary.....	27
Chapter 4 Researching central character story	28
4.1 The research methods we used	28
4.2 Exploring challenges to our practice.....	28
4.3 Looking closely at our teaching.....	29
4.4 Analysing our teaching - Mark’s storyline	34
4.5 Being curious: Investigating our understandings of central character story	35
4.6 An investigation into terminology: theory, dispositions and working theories	42
4.7 <i>Wall of Strategies</i> - linking our emerging ideas about how people learn:	44
4.8 Insights from Bush Street on central character	44
4.9 Parent involvement and education	46
4.10 Summary.....	48
Chapter 5 Emerging theories about learning for children and adults.....	49
5.1 Language and conversation	50
5.2 Action	50
5.3 Building relationships.....	51
5.4 Community	53
5.5 Collective curiosity.....	54
5.6 Links to curriculum.....	55
5.7 Summary.....	56

Chapter 6 How we did it: Research as collective learning within praxis.....	57
6.1 Research overview.....	58
6.2 Praxis-oriented research: merging theory and practice.....	59
6.3 One-pagers as a research tool.....	61
6.4 Research as collective learning within praxis.....	62
6.5 Summary of our approach to research.....	63
Chapter 7: Findings, insights and implications.....	64
7.1 Our findings in relation to our first three research questions.....	64
7.2 Our learning about teaching, families and community.....	64
References.....	70
Glossary of terms.....	72

Table of Inserts

Insert 2.1: <i>Environment Holding History</i>	8
Insert 2.2: <i>Web of Values</i>	9
Insert 2.3: <i>Common Threads of Learning</i>	10
Insert 4.1: Five children's involvement in and around a central character story.	37
Insert 4.2: Involvement of children	38
Insert 4.3: Planning sheet	40
Insert 4.4: Things that led up to and followed on from one story incident	41
Insert 4.5: The hour glass model	41
Insert 4.6: <i>Wall of Strategies</i>	43
Insert 4.7: Central character as a tool to support learning	45
Insert 4.8: <i>Ripples of Involvement</i>	47
Insert 5.1: Our use of Schrag's (1997) four aspects of the self after postmodernity	49
Insert 6.1: A braided river as a metaphor for research and learning	57
Insert 6.2: Smyth's four critical questions	59
Insert 7.1: The voice of a parent and child on the impact of central character	68
Insert 7.2: Abby's recollections	69

Table of Episodes

Episode 1 - Melinda waits while Mark remembers a story	29
Episode 2 - Helen weaves Mark's story into the Julie and Andrew story	31

Chapter 1 Introducing the project, kindergarten, authors and key ideas

1.1 Introduction

This report describes the New Zealand Early Childhood Centre of Innovation research project at Kidsfirst Kindergartens in Bush Street (Bush Street), Rangiora. Two teachers (Kay Henson and Helen Smith) took on the role of ‘teacher researchers’ from 2006 to 2008. The teachers were supported by research associates: Ali Wegner (2006) from Christchurch College of Education, and Elaine Mayo (2007-8) from the University of Canterbury.

The research project explores an innovation around the use of story. Like many early childhood educators, we use a range of stories in many ways as a core aspect of our teaching practice. Unique to our use of story is the creation of a character that exists for the ten weeks of a term, around which we can focus our story times and which we use to link activities and events that arise in the daily life of a kindergarten. We use the label “central character” to describe the role that this character will take in the life of our kindergarten for a set time. The excerpt below gives a glimpse of a story time at our kindergarten.

Imagine a sunny day, children sitting in a circle at mat time, some dress-up clothes in a large suitcase, an attentive teacher, and a parent acting out how she puts her child to bed. Imagine the children watching and comparing what happens here with what happens in their house: they comment, the teacher comments, the parent explains something, the child in the bed grins and pretends to be sleeping. Imagine a couple of other parents watching – and learning. We know this happened in term 3, 2007 because learning about going to bed became a part of the Mother Goose story.

We can remember that time without looking up our research notes because it was part of the “Mother Goose” story which played out during that term. The teachers introduced Mother Goose as a central character: she became part of many events; she provided continuity within the curriculum; children dressed up as Mother Goose and shared stories; imagination was fostered; social issues were addressed by talking with Mother Goose or her friends; the teachers had the tool (an ongoing character) on which to hang aspects of their curriculum; visitors to the kindergarten became part of the story through the skilled and creative inventions of the teachers and the parents knew about the central character and could easily strike up conversations with their children, beginning with a question “What did Mother Goose do today?”

Mother Goose and the whole cast of central characters that have been created serve a critical role in how we deliver the curriculum at Bush Street. This report tells how the central character concept is used, the thinking that underpins it and the rich learning outcomes we see from this kind of early childhood experience.

We are writing this report for a mixed audience and trying to write in a way that is both conversational and informed. Throughout the report we include material that practising teachers can call on in their work and we also show how this project has impacted on the learning of the authors. Each of us, Kay, Helen and Elaine, sees this project as personally

life-changing because of the ways in which we have been able to work together and explore ideas about teaching and researching.

The importance of story in early childhood (and other) settings is discussed in **chapter 2** and ways that story is used in other centres are recognised. As we investigated the many ways story is used we identified three significant aspects of story that are driving forces for central character stories but which are arguably true in many other settings. Material that is common to most storytelling is discussed.

In **chapter 3** we talk about what makes central character stories innovative and different from other uses of story. During our investigation of central character, we have come upon a number of challenging questions. We discuss these, how we have investigated them, and our collective learning about them in **chapter 4**.

Chapter 5 is one of our most important chapters: in it we describe the learning of children and the relationship of central character story to *Te Whāriki*. We call on ideas from our earlier writing and focus specifically on the learning of children.

We believe that the sociocultural underpinning of *Te Whāriki*, *He Whāriki Matauranga mo nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 1996) (referred to simply as *Te Whāriki* henceforth) has been echoed in the ways we have acted as researchers. The research processes we have undertaken are grounded, not in individual interpretations of what is going on, but in our collective learning as our ideas emerge in the hurly burly of our daily lives. Our research processes are discussed in **chapter 6**.

In the final chapter, **chapter 7**, we discuss children's learning within a wider sociocultural environment with a particular focus on how central character story supports the learning of parents and community.

1.2 Introducing Kidsfirst Kindergartens Bush Street

Kidsfirst Kindergartens Bush Street (Bush Street) is one of 62 Canterbury Westland Free Kindergarten Association kindergartens operating under the name Kidsfirst Kindergartens. The kindergarten at Bush Street in Rangiora services a wide geographical area and rural and town families from a wide range of generally middle-class socio-economic circumstances.

The kindergarten is licensed for a total of 30 children to attend each session. The centre is always full: there is a continual flow of children and their families through the centre. Parents are welcome to stay during the sessions and trainee teachers are often present as they complete their studies. At the time of the project, children started coming at about 3.5 years. The kindergarten is licensed to be staffed by two fully trained and registered teachers. The research project received funding to employ an additional teacher to provide release time.

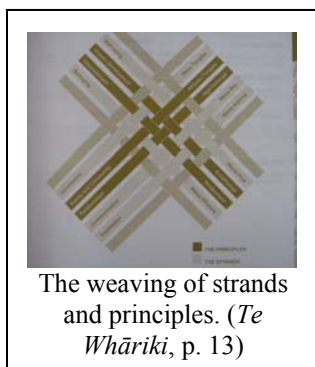
Each session revolves around the routines of children arriving, gathering together as a group, having morning/afternoon tea, putting things away and going home. Between these routines children are able to engage in their own choice of play, inside or outside and are supported to extend their ideas and be involved in a wide range of experiences. Children and teachers together construct the curriculum. As part of this process children are invited and encouraged to share personal stories from home by means such as talking about the

family trip to the beach, sharing photos of family outings or pets, telling of the excitement surrounding the arrival of a new baby or showing the toy brought that day.

With the older children in the morning session, personal stories often become the springboard for stories we share together through the use of a central character. The central character stories are emergent stories which build on children's interests, current issues, family experiences and teachers' ideas. Such stories are a part of the shared morning routines.

1.3 *Te Whāriki*, curriculum and story

The central character concept flourishes within the framework of *Te Whāriki*. *Te Whāriki* is not a prescriptive curriculum; neither is central character a prescribed way of implementing the curriculum. Both are interpretive, influenced by their contexts, and the values and beliefs demonstrated in the stories of the people, places and things in each setting.



Te Whāriki was implemented in early childhood centres in 1996. *Te Whāriki*'s central metaphor of weaving points to holism in learning, with a whāriki or mat being created, as Tamati Reedy has translated "for all to stand on" (Te One, 2003, p. 33, quoting May, 2002). *Te Whāriki* conceptualises learning as the weaving together of principles and strands. This metaphor can also be applied to central character stories where, through mindful weaving, the teachers create a Whāriki that includes the stories shared by children and their families. Families, community and teachers come together through a central character and his/her story.

Central character stories provide a means for teachers to voice aspects of the curriculum in a way that brings into action the lived histories of people, places and things. Over the weeks, the diverse stories woven into the central character story sessions stimulate listening, questioning, thinking and learning.

1.4 The path to becoming a Centre of Innovation (COI)

Kay's interest in story evolved as a distinctive aspect of her teaching. When Helen joined the kindergarten in 2002, she was introduced to Kay's storytelling concept and was "captivated and amazed." Within a few months, she became an active partner with Kay in the creating and ongoing development of their storytelling practices.

In 2004 Kay enrolled in a storytelling course as part of her studies at the Christchurch College of Education. While sharing her story practice alongside other teachers, she became aware of the unique way in which she had been using story in her teaching. The tutor, Bertha Tobias, noted and encouraged Kay's enthusiasm, passion and creativity.

In 2005 when Bernie Atger was the Kindergarten Practice Manager for Bush Street she suggested that the teachers apply to be a Centre of Innovation, on the basis of their unique story practice. This suggestion led to an application being made late in 2005.

1.5 The research collective: Children, parents, whānau, community

Children, parents, whānau and community have been at the heart of the research project and day-to day interactions at the kindergarten.

The research project is a collaborative process, supported by networks of people (e.g., parents, visiting teachers, other visitors) who may not normally be seen as part of the research team. Communication with them in various contexts allows various perspectives to be considered.

This process is aligned with our sociocultural theories of knowledge and learning which emphasise the “collective rather than the individual” (Fleer, 2003, p. 257) and the complexities which arise from this. We view our learning as we view the children’s learning. We believe that if we are to walk the talk of *Te Whāriki* and the principles which underpin it, we need to live by the principles, not just quote them (Meade, 2006, p. 2).

1.6 The culture of adaptation and the research process

The culture of ongoing change that we face in teaching creates uncertainty, new ideas and questions. Whilst the *Web of Values* (see insert 2.2, p. 9) that underpin our practice have been consistent, they are refined and adjusted in ongoing process adaptation to new events.

When we started to focus on questions rather than answers, we began to find positive ways to move forward. We were able to ask ourselves what was really important here for children, for families, for teachers. We then began the task of exploring possibilities.

Children ask questions. As teachers, we notice, and respond to these questions. We see children as researchers as they explore possibilities and develop their working theories to complement their learning. Teachers ask questions too. They ask questions of themselves as they notice and respond to children’s learning.

We found that central character stories actively involve children and adults in each others’ lives, living and learning together through acting as a pivot for questioning, and mutual exploring of all the possibilities that emerge in response. For example, through the Mother Goose central character story (summarised on p. 17) night time routines could be explored through personal stories and shared questions.

1.7 Research questions

We started the study with three research questions:

1. How do children learn through story and what impact does this have on families?
2. How does story evolve?
3. Where does story come from and what directs it?

Over time we came to realise that this project concerns the learning of adults as well as children and that our research questions needed to be broader and also link more closely with the innovation of central character story.

Research questions

1. Where does central character story come from and what directs it?
2. How does central character story evolve?
3. What do children, families and teachers learn through central character story?
4. What has this kindergarten community learnt through investigating the use of central character story?

Chapter 2 Story in Early Childhood Education

2.1 Introduction

Everyone in early childhood education is aware of how deeply embedded story is in our culture and how important it is for our learning. Through story we create our identities and develop our relationships. In this project we have found that existing writing resonates with our ideas. Engel (1995) for example, points out how our experiences are linked through both memory and imagination and reminds us that we come to see ourselves through the stories we tell.

We are who we are by virtue of what we have actually experienced. But part of who we are is determined by what we imagine ... [T]hrough acts of memory and imagination we depict ourselves as we might be or might have been ... our possible selves contribute to our actual selves, and we construct those possible selves through the stories we tell. (Engel, 1995, p. 186-187)

Children become more competent and powerful by “reflecting on experience and communicating with others” (Engel, 1995, p. 207).

Vivian Gussin Paley’s writing has helped us to see and explore our own use of story to understand the relevance of personal stories. We have chosen to buy *In Mrs Tully’s Room* (2001) because the words resonate with what we do. For example, when she writes that “community is seen and felt when memory and fantasy weave us into a common story” (p. 23) we think of how deeply we are embedded in our community and how we use story to weave our past into our future through our action in the present. When she writes “a parent knows his child” we know that our work enables parents to become involved in ways that help them and us to learn from each other. We share the belief that story can forge connections between people and places and develop strong relationships.

This chapter explores how we use story in early childhood education, how we read stories and how we create our own stories. We discuss the environment we create for our stories and conclude with the place of personal stories and their significance for affective learning.

2.2 Story

Using story to teach, to learn, to amuse and to delight is not a new phenomenon. Story has recorded and retold people’s realities and fantasies and brought people into common knowledge and understanding for a long time, throughout the world. Story is a means for cultural ideologies to be transmitted from one generation to another.

In July 2007, we asked teachers at a workshop to share their common storytelling practices. These included reading books, making books of children’s experiences, using drama and music, using puppets, telling story through art and using learning stories as a narrative assessment tool in recording children’s learning.

Brown (2001) used persona dolls to work with children in ways to combat discrimination. Soft toys and dolls can speak in ways that connect to the lives of children and families. “The dolls become real to them because their lives and experiences reflect those of the children ... The dolls we select, how we present them and the stories we create can

positively influence children's identity formation (Brown 2001, p. 13). Kay recognises that even before she used the central character concept she "was using knitted dolls because she did not have puppets" and she developed characters around them in a similar way to that of Brown.

2.3 Stories found in society and culture

Story shapes society, culture, family and individual identity and allows understandings and meanings to be passed on from generation to generation.

Sharing real-life stories was an essential element in forging friendships, alliances, families, and communities. It brought individuals a greater intimacy with each other and, simultaneously, a stronger sense of self. (Maguire, 1998, p. xiii)

As society is involved less in making things, and more in consumption, there is a *busyness* in life that does not easily include quiet times together sharing of oneself and listening to the stories and life experiences of those around you. Many of today's young families are not spending enough time together to share their stories and consequently co-construct their histories.

Stories shared together about everyday life experiences elicit questions and discussion. Tales and stories from the past can have important messages for us all. They can highlight how values have changed. The tension which arises from this awareness and consequent discussion can lead to more insightful thinking. Serious and important mythologies can be discussed in non-confrontational ways. Tempting young children from a young age to listen to and tell stories is a fundamental way to involve children in teaching and learning.

The stories we hear portrayed through television, radio, newspapers and the internet all help shape our perceptions of our selves and of others. Through these stories we develop views of people, places and things that we may have had no personal contact with. The media does not necessarily portray a range of perspectives, nor stories which may be less sensational. Personal stories, by contrast, help to develop genuine connection and understanding.

2.4 Stories found in books

Much of our research has been on stories created and shared in the kindergarten. We know that books are widely used in families and other places to foster reading and learning. We also use books in this way. More importantly, we use books to build relationships.

Storytelling is not an isolating experience. Picture a child cuddling up to an adult as they share a book. The author and reader may never meet but through the pages of that story they have a shared experience. Watch the joy on children's faces as they recognise an experience in the story being told as similar to one of their own. Reading a story is sharing time with people, even when you read alone: the author and the characters are with you while you read.

We select the books that reflect on our values when we buy for our centre: the books might play with language, be New Zealand oriented, introduce new material, extend the child's world, and/or be used for reference. We also have books which we may not have chosen ourselves but we treasure them because of our relationship with the gift-givers.

We don't necessarily read the books verbatim – sometimes we use the pictures as a starting point for conversations. For example, a book about New Zealand can lead us into discussion of our environment.

Books can be used within central character story to complement the personal stories of the moment. For example a character could use a reference book or share a favourite book from home.

Some people bring books to our centre that we would not have chosen to buy. When these books come to our centre we talk with the child about the way in which the book is shared at home: it could be that it is read each night, it could be a book that was precious for a parent, it could be the pictures they like, or a prize they won at Sunday school. Our strategy is to value the story that surrounds the book rather than its content.

2.5 Creating an environment for stories

Story permeates our programme at Bush Street and the teaching strategies we use to support children's learning in both morning and afternoon sessions. Before the central character story concept is introduced in the morning sessions for older children, children, parents and teachers have been used to sharing their stories through photos, special items and general news in the afternoons. The children's profile books provide a place to document stories from home and kindergarten as we begin the important process of building relationships and making connections.

As part of our research we have developed five brief models in the form of "one-pagers" that summarise our teaching through the use of central character story. These five models also act as a summary of our research when we work with groups of teachers. They are: *Environment Holding History* (p. 8); *Web of Values* (p. 9); *Common Threads of Learning* (p. 10); *Wall of Strategies* (p. 42); *Ripples of Involvement* (p. 47). These models evolved over time. The first three are discussed in this chapter and the others in chapter 4.

Environment Holding History: linking the physical, social and historical

We have objects in our physical environment which provide connections to people, places and things. Insert 2.1 shows photographs of the outside and inside spaces at Bush Street with notes to illustrate when and how various items came to be. The environment yields stories of those who have passed through it. Many of the things within the physical environment have a story to tell, a memory to share. These are things that can be touched, and interacted with: there are stories as to why these things are here in the first place and these tales can be recalled by teachers and others who hold memories of them. Through these stories children are being exposed to a wide range of ideas and ways of thinking. These things help us to remember the past, acknowledge the present and plan for the future.

We hope to engage children with caring for, knowing about and loving the environment. Environmental discussions move from being warm and fuzzy to addressing real issues, such as vandalism and graffiti, and disrespect for things not our own. The importance of valuing and looking after our environment is a continuous thread that runs through central character stories in various guises.

Insert 2.1 Environment Holding History (Term 3, 2008)

Old tree branch from home

English owls brought back from families who have visited 'home'.

Harakeke weaving gifted by visitors and families.

New Zealand native bird toys that travel between Kindergarten and home inviting and extending personal stories.



Mural painted by a parent with children helping. It depicts the local mountain, lake and river.

Harakeke flowers from previous stories.

Recycled box used as a boat.

Taniwha gift from family when they left.

Dress up clothes for central character story.

Above – indoors showing Kupe’s waka on the lower right

Both pictures show physical, social and historical memories. -

Below – the outdoors also shows our whakapapa

‘Tāne Mahuta’ bought by teachers as they had lunch together.

Letterbox gift from a family as they moved on to school.

Log from a local beach.

Vegetable plants gifted by a family who were growing their own at home.

Recycled box.

Rocks from the local river brought in by families.



Bird in tree a farewell gift from a family.

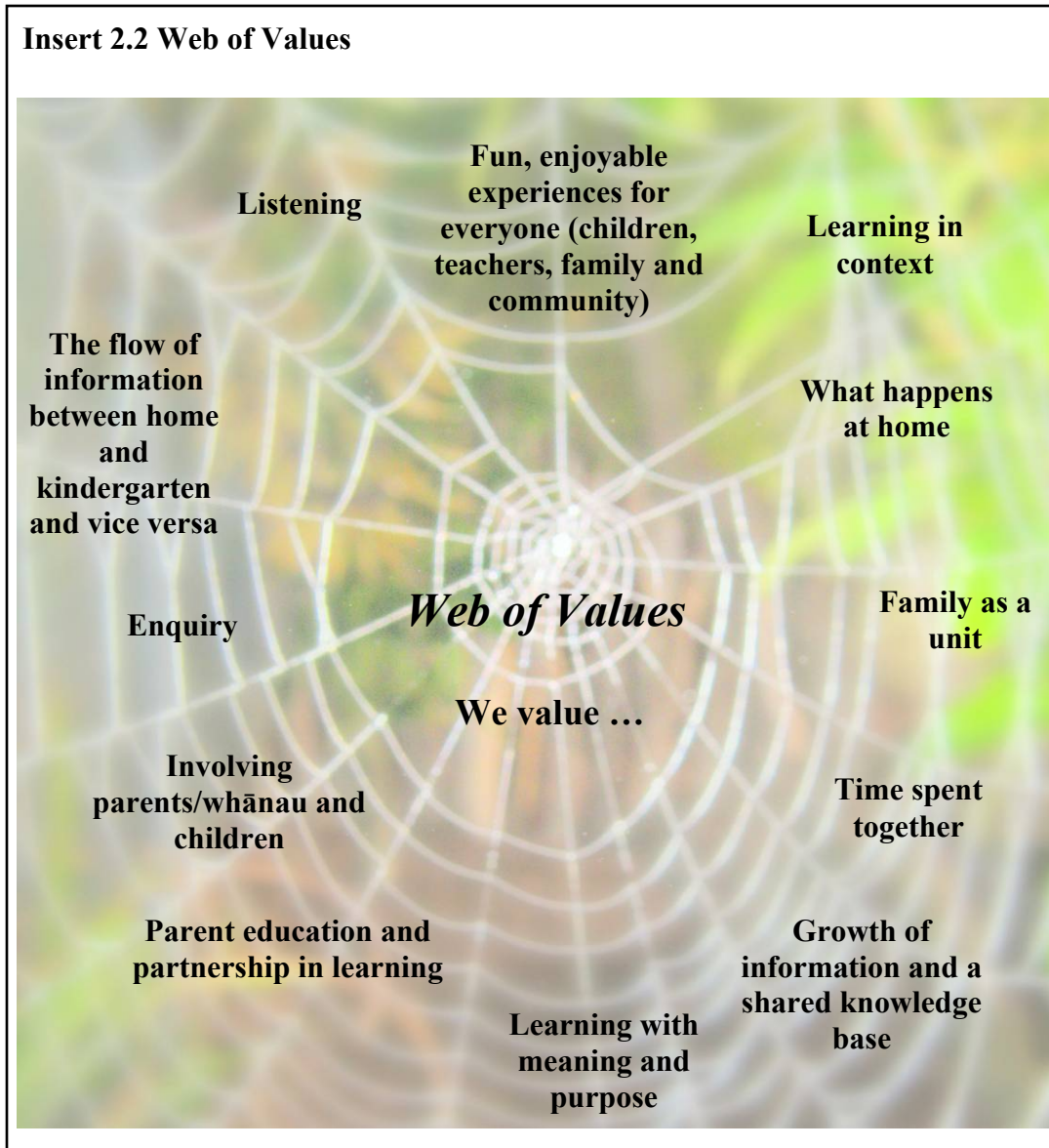
A ‘forest’ created by children who brought in plants from home and planted them.

Frame to the worm farm built by a family as a gift.

Bath for the worm farm donated by a family who, as they were renovating, listened to their child who said “we need that for Kindergarten.”

Web of Values

As we began to look at what we do as part of the COI project and to analyse learning, we found it really difficult to isolate one aspect of learning from another. As we analysed video-footage against *Te Whāriki* we wanted to identify clearly what sat behind our practice - there was so much interweaving. The strands of *Te Whāriki* were not specific enough for us at that time. Insert 2.2 shows the values that we see underpinning our practice that are in line with (but not laid out in) *Te Whāriki*.



Through identifying what we value as part of teaching and learning we were able to clarify our team philosophy and own what we were doing. The values we identified as underpinning our practice reappear through all stories and the new experiences we provide. This is a values-led (as opposed to rules-led) curriculum.

Common Threads of Learning

After we identified these values we became more curious about the layers of topics and the re-occurring threads of learning that we cover through the use of story in general. From a content analysis of the central character stories, we developed a summary (Insert 2.3) to make more explicit the threads of learning we were seeing and identifying through the use of central character story. We found the common threads of learning permeate our whole practice, not just central character story. The threads are also woven through the following chapters.

We have found this summary sheet helpful in fostering conversations between ourselves and our visitors.

Insert 2.3 Common Threads of Learning.

Awareness of self and others: As personal stories are shared through the central character. This may be for children, parents, whanau, teachers, students, community.

Family and community: Concepts of family, traditions, celebrations, life/death, place in wider community.

Self help skills: Dressing, feeding, looking after belongings, hand washing, preparing food, routines.

Keeping ourselves safe: Fire/earthquake drills, road safety, use of equipment, relationships.

Aspects of behaviour management and role of friendships: Role modelling appropriate behaviours, ideas and concepts.

Integrating aspects of the core programme: art, music, science, maths, dough, sand play, physically active, water, gardens, blocks, language etc.

Environment: The physical and social environment enables a culture of story for learning and a historical dimension as stories from the past are remembered and built on.

Environmental: Places, plants, animals, birds, cultural values, Maori guardians, local environments and landmarks.

Food and nutrition: Healthy attitude to food, knowing where food comes from, cooking and preparation, awareness of allergies, growing our own food.

Parent education: Supporting family values, inexpensive family fun, places to visit, behaviour modification, developing self help skills and independence for children.

“Add on value:” Being resourceful with what we have. Knowing what we value as resources and why we value these things.

Professional development and learning for teachers and students: We are learners too.

Values: How is our philosophy evident? What is important at this place?

Te Whāriki: The principles of family and community, relationships, holistic development and empowerment as well as the strands of belonging, wellbeing, communication, contribution and exploration.

Bi cultural and multi cultural lens: Overt or covert.



2.6 We write our own stories

Recording life in the centre is part of our day to day practice. We record our activities and experiences by taking photographs and, with children helping, we write summaries of the learning that has taken place, thus making learning visible through this narrative format. This activity, in itself, is a learning experience for both adults and children. These records, including personal and collective stories, are part of our shared history.

The personal learning stories we write for individual children go into their profile books. The children own their profile books: often taken home, they provide a link between the home and the centre. Each book is a unique combination of stories from the centre, stories written at home and the child's own chosen work. Our profile books are, therefore, not just a record of learning assessments, but a record of a child's learning over time, her or his interests and experiences. They are a physical resource where the child has the expert role as storyteller. We foster parental listening skills and the parental role through encouraging the child to share his or her profile book at home. The book is also a vital tool in transition to school as a document of the child's interests, experiences and **work to share** with his or her new teacher

Example: Profile books celebrate learning at kindergarten

Toni was leaving kindergarten; she was starting school on Monday. In the office lay three recently-unwrapped gifts. They were the teachers' portraits in oil – each had some common text added, but each was painted in a different and appropriate colour and design that captured a key quality of each individual. The teacher's portrait was always central.

I was moved by the gifts and the thought that had gone into each painting. I happened to turn one over and there, in the mother's hand-writing, was a message of thanks to the teacher for creating a wonderful start to Toni's education. It captured what Bush Street teachers do – giving education and firing a love of learning.



Story is a key feature of Bush Street COI. The teachers don't always notice now how central story is in their pedagogy. The 'exit' mat-time for Toni involved celebrating her learning stories – with Kay and Toni publicly leafing through her profile book recalling learning sequences. Toni picked out her favourite things, scampered over to her mother and aunt for a reminder about a place depicted on one page, and invited other children to add memories.



(Anne Meade, 14 March 2008)

At Bush Street we record collective stories in two ways. One way is a daily diary which we complete after each session by writing a one-page summary which includes photographs. This is displayed on the wall for parents and children to revisit and is later transferred to an easily accessible book.

In those morning sessions when central character story is used we also write one page around the story line for the day: a copy goes on the wall and contributes to the book that records the ongoing story, and a copy goes into the profile books of the children who have been part of the story. Often a personal note is added about the child's contribution to the story or the role they played. The recording of story highlights learning at the time, and also builds up a record of stories, a book, around that particular central character that allows us to revisit and recall experiences from the past. The books that we write contribute to ongoing conversations and learning for the children, the families and the communities of adults who are interested in what happens at our kindergarten. School children who revisit the kindergarten look back at these books and enjoy recalling and remembering events that surrounded their time at Bush Street. The photos stimulate their thinking and remind them of previous experiences.

In addition, we have several photo books that are constantly available to children. These contain pictures of places of interest in our community, such as playgrounds, shops and landmarks; another has local schools, while a third contains photos of children currently attending the kindergarten. These photos draw children into learning about their community and the people around them and they lead the children into telling and sharing personal stories stimulated by these photographs. Because these books are relevant and personal to the families attending, they draw community members into the kindergarten to read them and open up conversations.

2.7 Personal Stories

The purpose of sharing personal stories is not to reveal the intimate details of one's life but to create a platform on which to build relationships – to create a sense of acknowledgement and belonging.

Evidence of personal stories is everywhere in the physical environment at Bush Street – little, simple things, all with a story about people, places and things. We encourage children and their families to share their experiences with us of places they have been, people they know, their interests and ideas. It is through these stories that the physical environment develops with a rock here and a plant there.

Teachers share their experiences and become people, not 'just a teacher.' Through the sharing of personal stories, children, families and teachers find out about each other, make connections with similar stories, open up different ideas and perspectives, and develop ownership and connectedness to the physical environment at the kindergarten and to the people in it.

While stories are often initially shared one to one, we encourage many to be shared on a wider basis with the group when we gather together. As children listen to the stories of others they are able to extend their own understanding of situations.

Visitors to the kindergarten provide opportunities for the children to learn about welcoming and inclusion. Visitors can be active participants, not just passive observers.

Example: Involving visitors in a central story programme

Elaine is an adult visitor to the kindergarten. Children need to see adults role modelling inclusion and welcoming newcomers. It was noticed that Elaine had worn a pounamu necklace in previous visits. Kay knew the story of Poutini, a taniwha who is the guardian of pounamu. Maybe the central character could find some greenstone on a trip to the beach which could be a link to a friend (Elaine) who has a special necklace made from pounamu. Elaine could then be invited to tell her story. A child's story of the beach, a special story about taniwha and Elaine's story could be connected.

As it turned out, Elaine was wearing a crocheted shawl on her next visit and through a central character concern about knitting, making things and keeping warm in the cold, a crocheted shawl became part of the story, and the original plan was abandoned.

Inviting and encouraging children to tell their own stories is a means of affective learning and the regulation of emotion. Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007, p. 9) comment that aspects of cognition such as attention, memory, decision-making, motivation and self functioning are all profoundly affected by emotion and it is vital that we appreciate the importance of emotion in children's learning.

2.8 Summary

The origins of central character story are in storytelling traditions - stories have been used to tell and record people's realities, hopes and dreams through the centuries and across all cultures. Central character story evolves out of the interests and real experiences of this kindergarten community including its children, families, teachers and friends: it is shaped by whatever is uppermost in this kindergarten community on any particular day. Through central character story children, families and teachers learn the value of connections between past, present and future as well as connections to people, places and things. Central character story allows us to weave many personal story strands into an ongoing narrative, a collective story.

Chapter 3 Central character

*I'm not going to lose my enthusiasm:
I am going to take my enthusiasm with me for the ride!* (Kay, 2006)

Central character story is a valuable gift we did not seek, yet have discovered, treasured, and developed to link personal stories together. Central character story times create a time and space, full of learning and meaning, that we embrace with enthusiasm, as do the children and their families.

When you tell a story, you are giving your listener something to think about, so you may as well give him or her the time to think about it as well – even if it's a lifetime. (Maguire, 1998, p. 221).

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter we look at the concept of a central character, where it emerged from, how the idea works and what we are able to do through its use in story.

The central character stories discussed in this report represent our current thinking and our research based analysis of our central character story practice. We highlight the way the concept has evolved as our understanding of it has increased. The teachers have been working together for five years, and acknowledge how the continuity in our teaching and learning together has played a part in how central character story has evolved for us.

3.2 Central character

Each term we 'bring to life' a new central character who *lives* in the kindergarten for a term (approximately ten weeks). While the central character is fictional, it is related to the children; indeed it is based on their realities. The central character concept is not a theme or project but rather a catalyst that becomes the connecting link for a multitude of subjects and stories from children, teachers, families and community. The central character story time provides the *space* for us to come together at a regular time for sharing, recalling, weaving and developing a multiplicity of story threads. Central character story time is the *place* where an individual story stimulates story in others - adults and children. This learning integrates the individual and the community, and within the individual integrates feeling, thought and action.

A model of teaching and learning that reveals how the paradox of thinking and feeling are joined – where heart and mind work as one. When a person is healthy and whole the head and the heart are both – and not either or, and teaching that honours that paradox can help make us all more whole. (Palmer, 1998, p. 64)

3.3 Where this idea came from and how it evolved

This storytelling concept began in 1996 while Kay was teaching in Christchurch. She resolved to add meaning to a mat time that she perceived as boring. She started with an old leather suitcase, some props from home and the characters of 'John and Sarah' -

fictional but with some basis in stories about John and Jane Deans, pioneers in early Christchurch.

Kay writes:

I began finding a way through storytelling to share the things I love and to encourage children and those around me to do the same. I came to realise that for this to work effectively, I needed to put something of myself into it, some of my own feelings: my joys, sorrows, sometimes quirky and funny, but always genuine and sincere. And the listening I do, as the children begin to share, must be equally genuine and sincere.

When Kay and Helen began teaching together at the kindergarten in 2002, Helen was introduced to this concept. Helen writes:

I watched, captivated, for the term, as dress-up clothes were used to transform children into characters and stories started to unfold. What amazed me was the way this approach brought ideas to life. Over time I learnt many things. I learned to keep the story simple. I also recognised that I could contribute my stories. In fact, my own personal stories provided a great starting place. Most importantly, however, I learned to bounce off children's and families' stories. My first experience of facilitating a story enabled me to realise the complexity of the storytelling process but at the same time the need to keep it simple.

Over the next few years, the use of central characters became an integral part of teaching and learning life at Bush Street. This approach is ongoing, exciting and challenging, and, as new people join the team, new perspectives are woven into it.

A culture of story has emerged that we are able to share with others such as teacher trainees, and visiting teachers. Beccy Cresswick who was a teacher trainee on placement at the kindergarten for five weeks became involved in our central character story practice and commented at the conclusion of her placement :

I recognise that as I learnt to facilitate story, and develop the central characters, I began to take part ownership of the stories. I also recognise that in order for this to work, and my role as facilitator to be effective, I had to give of myself. I had to think and act "outside of the box" and often outside of my normal comfort zone. During my placement, it wasn't purely a matter of taking mat times, or even of facilitating mat times. I was facilitating story and consequently children's learning. I had to expose myself, and give as much to the children, the teachers and the community as they gave to me. It was a two way process. By becoming vulnerable, I feel that I was able to facilitate far better than if this vulnerability had not been present. (Beccy's one-pager, May 2008,)

Beccy's comments have also been reflected in feedback from a range of people including parents, grandparents, and many others as they have been exposed to, and involved in, central character story.

3.4 Meet the central characters in our research

Character stories used at Bush Street - Term 1, 2006 to Term 4, 2008.

The versatility of central character and the overarching ideas which led to each term's central character are given below. The "central character" is usually a person or a couple of people, but on occasion is mythical (see 2006, term 3).

2006 Term 1: John and Jane



John and Jane are based on the historical arrival of the Deans family as early settlers in Canterbury. Their stories enabled children to learn about life before electricity, to imagine what this land was like before the city of Christchurch was built and to explore where food comes from and what it is made with. We started our research here as John and Jane sparked the 'central character story' concept and programme.

2006 Term 2: Doug and Fern



Building on the knowledge about the land to which John and Jane arrived, we met Doug and Fern. These characters were interested in environmental issues and highlighted stories about spiders, whales, trees and Tāne Mahuta, the Māori guardian of the forest. A painting of Mount Grey, our local mountain, was painted and brought this landmark to the attention of our families. A visit to the local river to sing songs and cook sausages took children and families into the local environment where Department of Conservation staff were invited to join us and share their knowledge.

2006 Term 3: Ana and Maunga Taniwha



Teachers learning and sharing their knowledge enables others to learn and contribute their understanding. This happened in the stories of Ana and Maunga Taniwha. Stories were brought to our attention by the characters of Māori myths and legends. Teachers researched stories of local significance, often related to landmarks, rivers, mountains and beaches. This character story invited learning on levels such as geography, culture, history and language.

2006 Term 4: Professor Plum



Professor Plum arose out of a child's interest in rocks and his mother's interest in experiments. They made a home movie for us to watch, which children requested many times. Professor Plum was also interested in healthy food - an opportunity to highlight food teachers valued, to include input from local authorities and to have a shared lunch together. Professor Plum also went camping and introduced us to various ways of acknowledging Christmas.

2007 Term 1: Sackson



The character of Sackson evolved from a teacher remembering a storytelling technique she had used in the past. Sackson's sack was used as the canvas to start and add to story over the term. Sackson was able to acknowledge children's stories from the Christmas break, to explore and expand on the vegetables that were growing at home and the experiences children were having outside kindergarten such as travelling to the mountains, going boating and camping.

2007 Term 2: Grandpa Sydney



Grandpa Sydney started as a way to acknowledge ANZAC day. We planned to have two characters but the second never evolved. An older character elicited stories from home about children's experiences and relationships with older family members. For some, it was an opportunity to acknowledge grandparents remembered but no longer around, for others, ways to keep in touch - letters, telephone and internet. Grandpa Sydney told us stories about other countries in the world that he had visited.

2007 Term 3: Mother Goose



Language and literature was supported through children and parents sharing bedtime stories and routines through the character of Mother Goose. These stories supported families who were finding bedtime routines challenging. The painting of a night time mural also acknowledged the changing seasons and brought to the fore children's knowledge about night time.

2007 Term 4: Sam and Sally



Spring time, an invitation to enter a scarecrow-making competition and a child's love of his overalls were the creative impetus behind Sam and Sally. This story invited children to attach items from home to the scarecrow and share stories behind the items with the group. Sam and Sally also facilitated the planting of vegetables, children tasting vegetables as they grew, and caring for the environment, including birds and visitors to the garden.

2008 Term 1: Julie and Andrew

The starting point for Julie and Andrew was the teachers' love of *The Sound of Music*. This led to the sharing of favourite things, the creation of a new Mt Grey picture, visits to Mt Thomas and the local beach. Gathering harakeke to weave into baskets for collage materials led to an opportunity where parents could learn to weave. This story finished with a fundraising evening where families came dressed in their favourite things.



2008 Term 2: Rata and Harrison



These characters were a collaborative character development among three teachers. We each wrote a page on what we thought might happen and emerge. The result was a blending of teachers' ideas which incorporated children and family stories. The name Rata refers to a tree that had been significant on a family holiday and Harrison was linked with the latest movie release.

2008 Term 3: Kupe



This character was developed by Melinda in consultation with the other teachers. The team were engaged in professional development that included stories about historical Māori experiences. Melinda wanted a way to share our learning with the children through stories that relate to today such as navigation, fishing and adventures.

2008 Term 4: Farmer Brown and Tom



The character of Farmer Brown created links to the A&P shows which are a feature on the community calendar at this time of year. Farmer Brown had a son called Tom who was about to turn five. This provided the framework to explore and support children in the process of transition to school. Workshops were also held for parents about children starting school.

3.5 The central character stories are part of day-to-day teaching and learning

Central character stories do not sit in isolation – they build on what’s already there. The personal stories, which become part of the central character stories, are all part of our day-to-day practice and the relationships we build amongst teachers, children and their families. The use of central character story time in the morning session with the older group of children is a strategic decision because the children by the time they transition to morning sessions have been at kindergarten for a while, and have had experience in sharing their stories in other ways. They know that the teachers are really keen to listen to these stories. The *Common Threads of Learning* (p. 10, above) lists things that are part of day-to-day practice in both our own and other early childhood contexts. These threads allow us to offer evidence of the layers of stories within a central character story line and how central character story does not sit apart but is totally integrated into the daily life at the kindergarten. They are often the basis of conversations among other teachers and visitors who observe story and are interested, challenged or intrigued by this way of teaching and learning. Whilst the central character differs each term, we found from an analysis of each of the central character stories that the threads of learning ran through all stories.

Central character stories stimulate our thinking and passion for what we do and give us a tool to voice special features of the curriculum at Bush Street. They are a strong influence on how we view teaching and learning. Through central characters, we can actively engage children, parents and teachers in learning and teaching where hearts and minds, thinking and feeling work together - emotions are not removed from actions. Children see adults role modelling actions and emotions as stories are shared, and children are able to re-enact these themselves through the central character. Children are able to build on their emerging knowledge, skills and attitudes alongside teachers who are doing the same (see the *Wall of Strategies*, on page 42, below).

All the central characters represent some notion of a hero or heroine and good human qualities, and the values we have identified that are important in our teaching practice. Through the central character stories, we are able to bring to the fore, make visible, and role model learning dispositions we aspire to for children and for ourselves as teachers and students. The central character can model courage, playfulness, trust, perseverance, honesty and confidence. The central character stories support children to cope with change and difference, find out about new things, practise established skills, connect places and experiences, develop relationships with adults and peers, and take responsibility.

Most days, the routine that occurs before a central character story session includes the children playing a name game and sharing personal stories (some settings may refer to this as news time). Our teachers work together to encourage children to share things that a parent may have highlighted to us such as an upcoming trip or celebrating staying in bed all night. Teachers work together to keep this time forward moving and relevant while at the same time allowing space to pause and ponder. The stories shared at this time are used as a springboard for that day’s central character session and elements from these personal stories are included.

3.6 How we develop a central character

As we consider who (or what) could be the central character for the coming term, we are aware of things happening within and beyond the kindergarten community for individual children, groups of children, families, teachers and others. We remember our taonga (physical environment and whenua), our values and our reoccurring threads of learning, then ask ourselves:

- What are the current issues for children?
- What child and family stories are emerging?
- What are our emergent stories - personal and professional?
- What do we, collectively, want to learn about this term?

Towards the end of a term or perhaps during the term break, we ponder these things, wondering who might be our next central character. We share ideas and have fun sparking the creativity within ourselves and in each other as we explore possibilities. Sometimes one person takes the responsibility alone. It used to be Kay, but now it is a shared process. When we develop a central character we think about many things, for example:-

- What central character for the new term will be able to link many things?
- What is his/her/their name(s)?
- What is the reason for that name?
- Where does he/she live?
- Why does he/she live there?
- Who are his/her friends?
- Why are they friends? What brought them together?
- What does he/she wear?
- Why does he/she like to wear these clothes?
- What does he/she like to do and why?

We know we can weave all sorts of things into central character stories, and we know the weaving needs to be respectful and full of meaning and relevance for those taking part. We think about the ways we like to learn and work together as a team. This understanding gives a base on which to answer the above questions and to plan a central character who will allow various stories to emerge during the term and facilitate consequent learning for children, families and teachers.

Our understanding of *Te Whāriki* and its sociocultural principles sees learning immersed in the contexts in which it takes place. Central character story stimulates creativity as other contexts can be recreated through a central character and brought to life through a central character storyline.

In this planning of a central character for a term, we are setting up a space where great stories can emerge. We do not know what those stories will be, but we know we are developing a character who can adapt to the happenings that we might need to address with our children as the events of a term unfold.

We know we do not need to portray the whole character or set the whole storyline up at the start because the character and overall story will grow through the term as events

unfold. The character needs to be adaptable to allow for that development and the setting up needs to be rich in possibilities and ideas.

Teachers at workshops have told us about how they use imaginative tools such as dolls or puppets to add voices to their own, or how they wear hats or cloaks to adopt an imaginary persona. They do not speak of overseas educators, for example, Brown (2001) whose wonderful work on combating discrimination uses persona dolls, but they are doing similar things. This reminds us that ours is only one innovative practice and that many other centres are doing exciting things that deserve to be shared. Just as our innovation deepens learning by building on the personal stories of children, the COI programme has shown us the potential for ongoing teacher education through building on the personal stories of innovative teachers.

3.7 How the story of a central character is introduced

The clothing and the basic props for the start of a central character story are placed in the suitcase which is unpacked with the children as the new story begins. By the time the props are packed we have identified the children whose individual stories will start the term's process off. We know that plans can change, so we are always flexible and open to new ideas.

Firstly, we decide on some simple props to support the character. The props may grow over time, but to start with they would include the costumes that the child who is acting as central character for the day will wear. On a couple of occasions a backdrop has been created especially for the character. More commonly, routine resources from around the kindergarten are used. For example the bed from the family corner was included when Mother Goose was the central character.

Example: Integrating props and parents

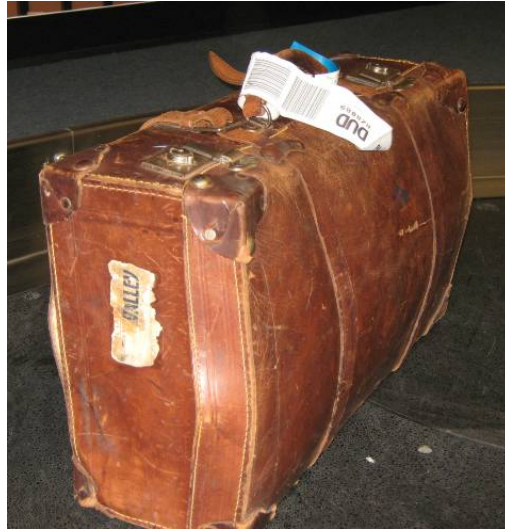
We were able to integrate the magic of bedtime in the winter through Mother Goose, with talk of stars, the moon, frosty nights and mornings, hot-water bottles, and special bedtime stories with parents, and family cuddles under the blankets. We heard some of the stories our parents and grandparents had listened to and knew about when they were little, as they shared them with us through Mother Goose. As different people told their stories, they also brought with them the props to complement the process.



Secondly, start to weave the story. Introduce the children to the central character during a routine time together. Take it gently, not too much at one time – entertain, tempt children to talk and build on their ideas and questions – this is teaching.

Example: Starting story

*A suitcase containing the clothes and props of the central character is brought to the fore. A child is chosen or volunteers to be the central character. The transformation of the child into the role of the central character happens as the clothes that represent the central character are put on. Other props that represent the central character's developing persona may be present at this time. You can then start to tell the first episode of the story. Sow seeds and ideas – hold the idea of the story loosely – **listen intently**.*



Thirdly, listen to children's ideas and create stories that weave experiences together. This is a strategic and creative process that we are trying to describe in this report. Some observers see the facilitation of central character as a teacher dominated activity. It is, deliberately so! But as we do this, we encourage participation through questions and pauses, and body language that invites involvement. The content supports learning at home and kindergarten. While most of the stories start from children and their family's personal stories, they are often interspersed with other content from the following: teacher's stories and interests, events in the community, global and historical events, myths and legends, fact and fiction.

The story emerges in a way similar to a soap opera development. Teachers weave ideas and personal stories into an ongoing saga while at the same time using the central character to maintain continuity. If it becomes too complicated it is often because we are thinking too hard rather than letting the process flow. When we first began using the central character concept we found we needed to plan carefully as we were still developing our skill in weaving ideas together. Gradually our skills have increased so that we are now more spontaneous and better able to be creative in how we blend our stories. The character develops in ways that we had not planned but which address the questions that arise for children. As experience develops it becomes easier to embrace creativity in the midst of working with children and their families in the story sessions. We sow many seeds of ideas that may grow or may show up later when least expected. The keys are careful listening and the skill to think quickly, in the moment, so as to weave children's ideas into the story. Teachers act as knowing participants who provide thoughtful leadership by creating links to past events and by opening up future possibilities for fresh stories.

It is taking children's interest seriously and becoming co-players with them. A good topic is one of interest to the adult as well as to the children. (Jones & Nimmo, 1994, p. 87)

Jones and Nimmo highlight the importance of engaging in a mutually interesting task, in our case creating a story that allows children and teachers to spark off each other. The interest of the other party soon fades if the topic in question is only of importance to one person. In selecting our central character and the topics that are explored, we try to balance ideas that have wide appeal with new concepts that may be known only to a few and thus stretch the thinking of many. We want to expose children to new ideas and ways of thinking while at the same time building on the familiar. The aim of central character story is to support and extend the learning for both children and adults.

3.8 An insight – the metaphor of theatre-sports (a form of improvisational theatre)

On any given day, a kindergarten teacher has to deal with multiple issues: family matters, meeting regulatory requirements, unexpected crises, and children wanting to tell what they have been doing at home.

What do teachers do with all these things? The metaphor of theatre-sports acknowledges the speed and energy of what happens in a day or at any given moment, involving decisions about what is most important. At story time, the metaphor is particularly apt. In the microcosm of the kindergarten world, the teacher asks herself, what will contribute to the ongoing life of this story, what can be discarded for the moment, what are the most important issues?

Central character story times provide a time and a place to address issues, acknowledge and honour the personal stories that have come in from home, explore values and take time to share. Many story ideas can be explored and shared at once through the use of a central character. The storyteller can be likened to the improviser who weaves all the ideas given to them into a coherent whole by using a character and shares them with a wider audience. As in improvisation, there is no script to be followed.

There is also a pace about this event – not getting stuck on any one thing, keeping the story moving, and listening for the next cue from the child actor in costume or the audience as to which direction to take. Whilst the story is flexible and moves with the participants in response to the situation, the improviser needs to retain a strong storyline that captures the audience.

Example: Weaving stories beyond topics and themes

We had visitors today - teachers from another centre came to see us working with central character story. We showed them our Common Threads of Learning sheet before they watched the action, and afterwards they were able to see how many of these threads had been included in the story. We carried on talking about what might happen next, tomorrow. The teachers lit on an idea that had been mentioned in the story that day. It was about babies, because they saw how babies could become a theme. We realised how hard it is for other teachers to move beyond topics and themes. We were in a different head-space, however, thinking about how to work with the complexity of carrying multiple threads through story.

This account highlights the importance, and difficulty, of moving beyond a focus on one thing at a time as a topic or theme to being able to create a learning setting where

many emerging personal stories and interests are addressed at one time within a central story line. Moreover, one episode is not a stand-alone story with a beginning, middle and end. It is the middle of a long-lasting, multifaceted, untidy and complicated story, (which is why the soap opera metaphor came to our minds). Multiple interests are catered to concurrently.

3.9 Mood, 'magic' and spirituality

In Western culture it is not common to talk about spirituality and magic because of the connotations these words hold. We use these words in this section to talk about a connectedness between people and events, a feeling that something out of the ordinary has occurred on these occasions - a connection that belongs to the group of people at that particular time.

On any given day the central character story will be different, not only in the type of story being told, but also in the mood and the feelings that surround it. Central character story times may also vary in length from 5 to 25 minutes although they would typically last 10-15 minutes. The stories are told to amuse, delight, inspire and inform. They are told to draw people together, to share in experiences and thereby build relationships.

A story time can encompass major world events such as the Olympics or 9/11 or indulge a child's interest in fairies. As these ideas are explored the mood can change. Many things contribute to the mood or feeling that surrounds a central character story session such as the composition of the group, the spontaneous contributions of children and adults, the setting in which the story occurs, relationships within the group and events that occur before the sharing of the story.

There are times when the children, family, teacher and community stories come together and there is a feeling of 'magic' or a surrounding energy. This feeling cannot be planned but some of the events that occur before the story begins seem to add to the possibility of this occurring. Things that seem to contribute to the magic are the children and teachers exploring a common interest, teachers listening and learning from children and children being respectful and learning from others. It does not have to be serious.

Example: A story built on an interest in fairies

The children were invited to dress up as something you find in the garden. The next day we had fairies, a tree, cats and dogs, a 'bad man', super-heroes and a barbecue to weave together. All these characters were woven together, with a teacher accepting ideas from the floor, into a story about a garden, and all the characters having a barbecue at the end. Parents who had stayed to watch were soon drawn in, as pieces of material were used to transform them into a pond and a sun.

The teacher held the story loosely as the characters were drawn into this event. The energy between people could be felt, yet the story had no purposes in mind but to honour a child's interest in gardens and to include all who were there. We had a lot of fun that day. The feeling that surrounded this moment was described as magic; some would call it spiritual as hearts and minds connected.

Another occasion that shows mood, feeling and magic was a very sad one.

Example: ANZAC

We had been talking about ANZAC day and shared a story based on Jennifer Beck and Robyn Belton's (1996) "The Bantam and the Soldier".

We talked about death and remembering those who have died. On return to the kindergarten, after the public holiday, we found Rosie our canary had died. This event had more significance because of events that had preceded it such as acknowledging ANZAC day. A child had been taking the bird back and forth between her house and her grandmother's daily over the term break. There was a feeling of sadness as children related their own experiences of relations and pets that had passed away and their involvement in ANZAC parades. For some children it was their first identifiable experience of death. As part of the central character story that day we had a funeral with a parade and said goodbye to Rosie.

Although this event was sad, it was another day where we felt the magic and energy of the group come together. An unspoken connection was felt around a shared experience.

These two examples illustrate a connectedness among people and a collective experience that is significant. This connectedness does not always occur in central character story work. Sometimes the central character story is a functional bridge to move the story from one place to another. Sometimes the group is restless and unsettled.

In our research, we have identified some things that contribute to the mood that surrounds a story. Many of these, such as group composition and events before the central character story, are not of our making but the coming together of many factors that we cannot control. It is exciting when 'magical/spiritual' stories occur. We know when they occur and they stay in the hearts of those who were there.

3.10 What the central character story enables us to do

The evolving central character story enables us to weave events from the lives of a child/family with those of others in the kindergarten. A child's place in his or her family and the wider community, as well as traditions, celebrations, values, and beliefs are able to be shared through the use of a central character story. Central character stories also celebrate the resources around us, and treasure our natural environment. The central character story sessions allow us to address a multitude of stories and issues in a term whilst ensuring learning for the whole child. It caters for diversified learning styles within the group.

Data has been drawn from central character story sessions, self review, feedback from participants (parents and children as well as other teachers, relievers and visitors to the kindergarten) and intensive periods of discussion and writing. Through analysis of how central character story encourages learning for children and their families we found:

- Though the teacher may be facilitating the story, children also become the teachers. Their stories are being woven into a collective whole and children can, and do, contribute further ideas as the story session is occurring
- The role of leader/learner can be easily interchanged between adults and children
- Children take on roles to the extent that the fiction becomes their reality. When they are dressed up they become the central character. Pretend play is not foreign to them – they often become other people - but this character is relatively constant for a term
- Children are introduced to experiences that are different from their own in a visual and real way that invites their curiosity and exploration
- The character is not the focus of the whole session on the mat. The character provides continuity and puts the spotlight on particular experiences
- Children are able to use dress up clothes and props to create their own stories and explore the character themselves for the rest of the morning
- Central character gives parents a ‘hook’ into what has been happening on any particular day and gives them a specific to ask their child about, rather than the broad question, “what did you do today?”
- Parents become interested in the developing story and can build on the experiences talked about at home
- Central character story gives teachers a time and space to weave together the planned and unplanned events that occur in the kindergarten
- Central character story can be a trigger for future events to happen, such as a trip, or inviting visitors that are related to the storyline to join us
- Trips and social events that are part of typical kindergarten life are woven into the story and integrated in meaningful ways
- Children’s memory of kindergarten seems to be enhanced through the central character process. Parents tell us about remembered central character stories that their school age children talk about
- The sharing of self through central character stories allows children, families and teachers to flesh out their identities
- Teachers are able to integrate their own professional learning journeys such as learning to play a musical instrument by having a central character learn to do the same
- Parents are able to share their experiences, ranging from high points such as catching a big fish, learning to weave and shifting house, to the sharing of simple rituals of bedtime, a camping holiday or a walk on the beach, by joining in story times, either ‘on stage’ or as interactive members of the audience.

All these happenings contribute to the central character's story. Many happenings are not unlike what happens in most early childhood education settings. What the central character story does is to draw all these events together to a central place where they are noticed and responded to in a unique social setting. Parents often stay to watch central character story sessions. Parents tell us that they like the way these story sessions link home life into the kindergarten.

3.11 Summary

In this chapter we have explored some of the features of central character stories and how they develop out of the community in which we live.

Central character story lines develop and change in response to current issues and emerging ideas. As teachers we are able to be creative and we work together to develop stories.

Central character story was started by Kay around 1996: she dressed children up in costumes as a way of making teaching an historical topic more interesting. It has developed into a way of weaving personal stories around a character in a costume.

Each term the teachers create a fresh central character based on their knowledge of the learning interests of the children and their families, and the creativity of the teachers. The character grows out of the existing environment, resources, and people. The goal is to create a character who is flexible and open enough to grow through the term and whose story can address many issues.

Chapter 4 Researching central character story

In this chapter we describe our researching about the impact of story on learning. First, we identify and develop the kind of emergent theorising that goes on as we weave a story. Secondly, we describe investigations in relation to particular questions that emerged as we began to explain our practices to other teachers. The chapter ends with a discussion of one of our key insights, that central character story is a very powerful tool for providing leadership for learning and for enabling our children and families to learn together about the intricacies of life and relationships.

4.1 The research methods we used

All the investigations described arose out of our curiosity. A visiting teacher might, for example, have asked a question about how different children are involved and that would trigger an exploration of our practices. Sometimes we used well established ways of data gathering, for example, interviewing a sample of our parents, but at other times we developed our own research tools and ways of showing what happened. At these times, our curiosity was the guide to our research planning and consequent work. Our research planning was emergent: we addressed questions as they arose, just as we do in central character story: our methodology was to be responsive to emerging challenges and questions, to document our actions and thoughts as went.

4.2 Exploring challenges to our practice

As part of our research contract we have shared our ideas about our central character innovation with colleagues. Dissemination has generated fresh challenges and questions for us. One of the problems has been that when visitors come into the centre and watch one episode of central character story they cannot see the *Common Threads of Learning* (above, p. 10) running through the story across time; they may question why one particular child seems to be getting lots of attention, not knowing our systems for sharing the central character role over the term. Without an interpreter, the significance of some of the words is lost. They cannot know the reason for the excitement the teachers feel about one child's learning yesterday. They miss seeing the build up of knowledge by the teacher and the creativity in the emerging story. They cannot recognise that a comment from a child calls on a past event and they cannot realise how the story is reinforcing the values that underpin practice.

The questions we have been asked, and those we ask ourselves, have encouraged us to look closely at what we have been doing intuitively. As we studied our practice, we were able to identify from another angle our thinking, our philosophy, shared values, the complementary way we work and our differences in approach. We have explored these ideas with teachers who are interested in building continuity into their programmes. The teachers who visited ask about whose story is heard, who we choose to play a central character on a given day, what other characters can emerge during a central character story and why, whether everyone gets a turn, which incidents in personal stories we follow, and how we use the environment to support story. We address these questions in this report by looking closely at two examples of our research into central character story sessions.

4.3 Looking closely at our teaching

Julie and Andrew were central characters in term 1, 2008. The two episodes we describe span two days during a time when the teachers were building story around environmental issues. The teachers were also preparing the children for a “Favourite Things Family Evening” at the kindergarten’s family fun night. The central characters were already involved with weaving harakeke (flax) and were planning a trip to the beach to gather some harakeke for weaving.

The incidents we describe began in a session where the children were all gathered together in a circle at mat time. In the first few minutes of mat time, before we even identified who would play the central characters for the day, the talk turned to “favourite things”. Melinda, the teacher, knew that later, during a fun evening with families, the children would see movie clips from the Sound of Music where Julie Andrews would be singing about her favourite things. The following two episodes illustrate how the central characters permeate the life of the centre: even when the characters are not present in costume, their ongoing stories form a backdrop to the life of the centre.

At the time of the events we describe in Episode 1, Mark had settled well into kindergarten but did not readily express his thinking and ideas within the large group. Now that he felt a sense of belonging, we were keen to follow his story when he contributed to the topic of favourite things. The teachers did not know his parents well because his grandparents brought him to and from kindergarten.

Episode 1 - Melinda waits while Mark remembers a story		
Story line	Pedagogical actions	Insights
Melinda asks the children about some of their favourite things	Melinda is facilitating discussion	Children’s stories act as a catalyst and jumping off point from which to integrate the stories and interests of others.
The children were taking turns sharing their thoughts.	Melinda scans the group, carefully using body language and eye contact to support turn taking	Sharing ideas helps build relationships between children and adults. It develops the art of communication - talking and listening beyond the words.
Mark chipped in with “My favourite thing is my dog”.	Melinda encouraged Mark to add his ideas when it happened naturally for him to do so.	Children know the adults are very interested in their lives and those of their families outside of kindergarten – and want to hear these stories at kindergarten.
Melinda asked why his	Melinda is curious and she	Stories come out of curiosity and

dog was his favourite thing.	role models open questions.	asking questions about things we don't understand.
Mark responded with "my Mum throws ...", and there was a big pause. Mark was deep in thought.	Melinda watches silently – listening.	Emerging stories cannot be hurried and do not fit into a set <i>time</i> . The <i>time</i> fits the story.
Melinda waited patiently, comfortable with the silence.	Melinda perceived that Mark was not uncomfortable, and he was trying to recall what it was that his mother throws to the dog.	Children need time to think out what they want to say.
The children started to make suggestions: "Is it a ball, a stick?" Mark responded: "No" to each suggestion.	Melinda allows participation from other children to help Mark – her intuition tells her that for Mark it is ok for her to do so.	Sharing personal stories create a <i>space</i> for children, families and teachers to work within and enable ideas to be offered which can then be either accepted or rejected by a child.
Eventually Mark continued his story. "My Mum throws a burrito like a frisbee and my dog gets it."	Melinda created the space and time for Mark to finish his thought.	Story allows simple ideas and the unexpected to come together.
Mark was then able to tell the group more about his dog and the context in which he catches burritos.	Melinda extended his thinking, by being curious and asking questions.	Story allows the layering of ideas - from one child to build on the ideas of another, and for stories from home to be shared at kindergarten.
Other children contributed their stories about family pets.	Melinda allowed Mark's story to broaden in a way that that was meaningful for the large group.	Story enables connections to be made - it enables teachers and children to be aware of, appreciate and act on many diverse layers to learning for children, families and teachers.
Kay supported Mark to share his story with his grandmother.	So the story would go home and bring home into kindergarten for Mark	Involving family, home and community in kindergarten life through sharing personal stories builds relationships and meaningful partnerships in learning and living.

The events described in Episode 1 had an impact on Mark's life and family. At the end of session Mark and Kay shared his story (Mark telling about the burrito throwing incident) with his grandmother when she picked him up from kindergarten. This incident led to conversations at home within the family because the grandmother had not heard about the burrito incident and when the parents heard about his remembering of it they were surprised because the burrito game had happened quite a long time earlier. Later, when Kay met Mark's mum, it was an immediate catalyst for a conversation that helped to develop a warm relationship. Even though Mark's burrito story in Episode 1 did not occur within the central character story of Julie and Andrew it is important as it shows how we work with personal stories, and our thinking about story practice. Our practice regarding any shared story also leads into the story session the next day and therefore enables a fuller description of central character story in action, drawing on preceding story sessions as well as the happenings of any particular day.

Helen was not there when Melinda took the mat-time session described above, but she heard about it because the teachers and the grandmother were talking about it. Helen was responsible for facilitating mat time the next day, and on hearing Mark's story wondered about how she might weave his story into the ongoing saga of Julie and Andrew and the forthcoming trip to gather harakeke. Inspiration! Helen's sister's dog, Meg, had learnt to fetch harakeke flower stalks (korari) and loves to play with them. Helen arranged to bring Meg into the centre the next day.

Episode 2 shows the key ideas that Helen wove together during the story session on the following day. The way Helen led the story session allowed the children plenty of opportunities to weave their ideas from yesterday into the day's story.

Episode 2 – Helen weaves Mark's story into the Julie and Andrew story		
Story line	Pedagogical actions / thinking	Insights
Helen brought Meg, the dog, to kindergarten	To involve a real dog in story and to link with Mark's story.	Teachers build on an emergent curriculum by bringing resources to weave what happened yesterday into today's story, and by using the resources already in the kindergarten.
Kay brought burritos and some fillings for the burritos to kindergarten.	Because some children did not know what a burrito was.	
All three teachers knew they could gather vegetables in the kindergarten garden to put in the burritos.	It's meaningful to prepare food and to learn where food comes from.	
Several story lines from previous sessions offered possibilities depending on the children's interests on the day	Helen, Kay and Melinda were all aware of the previous individual children's family and teachers stories leading up to that day.	To re visit past stories gives opportunities for new things to emerge that we might not think about otherwise.

<p>Helen chose Sarah to be Julie. Sarah told her own story about collecting rocks from the river and painting these with her family.</p>	<p>Children can tell their own as well as their family stories in the guise of the central character. They can tell about places they love to visit in the natural world and why they love them.</p>	<p>Central character stories can weave environmental issues into the story line because of the simplicity of the story framework.</p>
<p>Sarah was keen to dress in Julie's clothes.</p>	<p>Children can practise the self help skills of dressing.</p>	<p>Central character stories support children's growing independence.</p>
<p>Kay chose Mark to be Andrew. On this day the central character, Andrew, had a dog, who also liked to catch burritos.</p>	<p>Helen had a dog to deal with and when lots of storylines merge teachers work together.</p>	<p>Central character stories keep teachers real as professional and personal boundaries overlap.</p>
<p>When Mark was being dressed as Andrew he put on a t shirt with harakeke on it</p>	<p>Mark did not want to wear the usual clothes that Andrew wore.</p>	<p>Central character stories give a place for children to have an opinion and to say "no" - and for other children to see and hear that happening.</p>
<p>Meg the dog shared her story through Helen.</p>	<p>Helen wanted to tell why she had brought Meg and why her story links with Mark's. (Meg likes to clean out old harakeke bushes and to play a game of fetch with the old broken flower stalks.)</p>	<p>Dogs have personal stories too.</p>
<p>Helen linked Meg's love of "fetch" with the recall of children's ideas from yesterday when they made suggestions about what Mark's dog might fetch.</p>	<p>To provide an opportunity to recall the stories from yesterday - or maybe add some new ideas about dogs or fetch.</p>	<p>Central character stories build memory in a meaningful way.</p>
<p>During story time, Helen threw a burrito to see if Meg would catch it. (Meg ignored it)</p>	<p>To open up conversations about Mark's story. Because it would be fun for everyone.</p>	<p>Central character stories are about the real things – between people, places and things ... and dogs!!</p>
<p>Mark held the burrito for Meg to smell (Meg ate it.) * See photograph at end of this table.</p>	<p>Expect the unexpected.</p>	<p>Central characters encourage <i>mindful</i> and <i>purposeful</i> spontaneity and creativity.</p>
<p>Helen threw a 'korari' for Meg (Meg rushed after it and played with it).</p>	<p>Its fun to learn new ways of saying things.</p>	<p>Central characters provide a framework to introducing new words in a meaningful context where they can be experienced, e.g korari.</p>

Kay asked children how to cook burritos	Kay pretended to not know how to cook burritos and invited Andrew (aka Mark) to help and be the chef.	Central characters provide opportunities for children to be leaders and teachers to be learners.
Melinda asked children to help get vegetables from the garden to go in the burritos.	Melina involved the children to use their skills to dig, wash and chop vegetables and to recall experiences of doing these things at home – or not.	Central character stories give a place to use authentic and natural resources purposefully, draw links with home, healthy eating, and experience new ways of doing things that might be different from home.
Meg spent time with the children	Helen used this opportunity to give advice about how to meet and greet strange dogs	Central character story sessions give a safe place to experience the realities of keeping ourselves safe as we enact scenarios around safety.
Everyone ate burritos together outside.	Teachers facilitated conversations around health and hygiene in relation to working with food and the ritual of sharing food with friends.	Central character stories give the time and space to honour time spent together, being hospitable, and for children to try new things.
Kay and Mark talked to his grandmother at the end of session	Teachers help stories to go home	Central character stories give a place to link home, kindergarten and community.



Just as life is multi-faceted so are central character stories. If Mark's story had been developed outside central character storylines, it would still have been an important story for Mark. Helen chose to give Andrew (i.e. Mark taking on the role of Andrew) the ownership of a dog. She was able to talk with him about "his dog"; she was able to encourage more dog stories from other children, and she was able to involve Mark's story. The impact of this story on his family became apparent when Mark's grandmother gave feedback.

Mark's grandmother writes:

"When Mark told me that he'd help make burritos the next day and Helen had brought her dog to trial as a burrito catcher, I felt really pleased and proud of and for Mark, ...as if by Mark's contribution we had all become a little more included and involved in the life of the kindergarten. The page of photos that appeared in his profile book was so important for the whole family, especially Jo and Neil (Mark's parents). We love looking at them and re living what had happened".

We noticed after this incident that Mark gained more confidence in the group and other children became more aware of who he was.

4.4 Analysing our teaching - Mark's storyline

These two episodes show how children can see their stories woven, alongside others, in the ongoing drama, and it also shows how we involve all the children, although that may not be apparent to a casual visitor. We are constantly noticing which children are taking part and, as we show in the next section, we have found various ways of investigating the relationships that emerge during sessions. By weaving Mark's story into the central character story the teachers enabled other children to extend the discussion. These openings allow other children's and family stories to surface. We are not able to record the impact on all children - we know, anecdotally, that children, who are not apparently active participants during a story time take stories home to share with their parents.

In our COI investigations, we have found that our intuitive responses during interactions with the children in a story session could reveal our emerging theories about teaching using stories. One theorising thread explored our understanding of an emergent curriculum. We found that Jones and Nimmo (1994, p. 5) captured our thinking well.

In an emergent curriculum we take the children as our models and our co-players. We *are* the stage directors; curriculum is teachers' responsibility, not children's. People who hear the words *emergent curriculum* may wrongly assume that everything simply emerges from the children. The children's ideas are an important source of curriculum but only one of many possible sources that reflect the complex ecology of our lives. Teachers need to have both the ideas and vision of where the players might venture together. The teacher is the responsible adult, the organizer who sets the stage, times the acts, and keeps the basic drama together. On those days when all the parts come together, the result is truly magic.

Our answer to a question, for example, about which stories the “responsible adults” select to tell, would include some of the following points. We choose to develop the stories that are of interest to both children and adults and allow the curriculum (including our *Common Threads of Learning*) to emerge spontaneously. We watch out for the stories that are likely to generate connections between children at kindergarten and home life with their families, as Mark’s story did. We really enjoy the stories that take us down exciting side-roads and allow us to be creative in making connections in a non-linear way. We include stories that encourage parents to spend time with their children through simple home-based activities (including gardening, sewing, baking) or in excursions to natural places. At times we support parent education, for example, by role-modelling putting a child to bed, or encouraging healthy eating, or encouraging a child to learn to get dressed. Sometimes a particular parent is invited to stay and observe a central character story as we model routines; sometimes parents are involved as actors in the story; sometimes the children learn about what they might be capable of doing by seeing others demonstrate new skills in, for example, getting dressed by themselves.

Our story sessions involve our parents, our visitors and our colleagues. They allow us to weave in situations that arise, such as a parent rescuing a penguin and a mother’s experiences in visiting Antarctica. The list is endless: we include stories about local events like the A&P show, personal stories about the teachers’ lives, the farmer and his tractor, and things the teachers and parents want to learn about (flax weaving, guitar playing). Teachers spot the stories that have the potential to be mutually interesting and to foster enthusiasm in the storyteller and the audience. But there is no formula. The activity of teaching in this way is a bit like being an actor in theatresports: having a variety of storylines that could be used, but actively feeding off audience interests, and engaging the audience in the action. We build on our existing knowledge and experience to juggle the ideas and resources we have at our disposal.

4.5 Being curious: Investigating our understandings of central character story

In this section we report on some of the ways we investigated how central character stories link together and how they involve children and families.

Episodes 4.1 and 4.2 illustrate how our emergent theoretical thinking about central character story is directly connected with the realities of day to day teaching and the lives and learning of children, families and ourselves as teachers and real people. The insights identified in the right hand columns evolved systematically over the three years of the research contract as we unravelled the learning and meaning inherent in central character story. After analysing the links of central character story to *Te Whāriki*, we acknowledged the “*wow factor*” in what we were able to do through a central character. There was so much more than words could explain. In 2006, we did not realise the complexity of our apparently simple story process. Our analysis of the John and Jane story led to the *Web of Values* (see Insert 2,2, p. 9) which underpin our teaching and the way we work through central character. Whilst we accept the research imperative to stand back from practice in order to be objective, at the same time we wanted to retain our active engagement as

Wow factor – a moment that can be a moment of significance, magic, connection, or learning. It makes you go “wow”.

teachers. We wanted to position ourselves in our research in a way that reflected the realities of teaching – and teachers learning alongside children, families and a maze of associated contexts.

Investigation 1 – looking closely at the gallery of central characters

Helen developed some pamphlets as she grappled with her questions about central character story and how we could explain it clearly and succinctly to others. The list of central characters (Section 3.4, p. 16) introduced the characters and some ideas from which these stories grew.



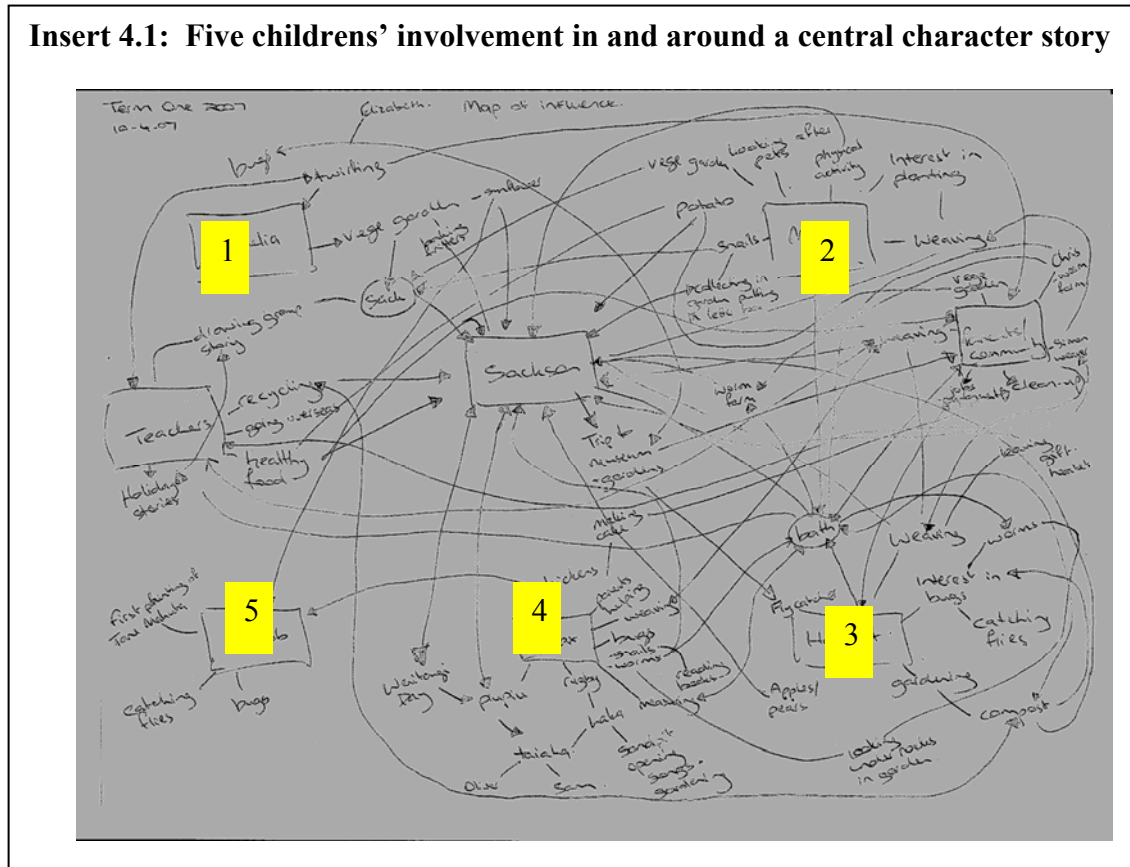
Investigation 2 – looking closely at children’s involvement

Meanwhile, Kay became curious to explore the ways children’s contributions add to central character stories and the impact making these contributions had on their learning. To track the involvement of all children would be too large so she tracked the involvement of five children for the duration of the central character story of Sackson.

At the end of the term, Kay and Helen discussed whether all personal stories are linked through central character stories and how they build around the central character. They drew a diagram that showed how these current stories related to each other, or not (Insert 4.1).

Each word in the diagram reminds us of personal stories that have been part of the lives of the five children during term 1, 2007. The arrows show the links between the personal stories of different children and their families. The pattern of arrows shows that some stories came together and some sat alone. We note that the central character of Sackson, in the middle of the diagram was not always linked to the personal stories of the children. This diagram shows that, for example, child 5 does not have as many connections to other stories as do other children, but he is still involved.

Insert 4.1: Five children's involvement in and around a central character story



Developing the diagram highlighted for us the diverse ways the central character of Sackson was used to weave individual children's stories into the ongoing storyline. The documentation showed that not all stories flow from or through the central character. It made clear that the central character is a catalyst for stimulating the flow of personal stories. With curiosity aroused about how, and in what ways children's and family stories contribute to central character storylines, our next step was to track which children took leading roles at different times.

In term 2, 2007, the central character was Grandpa Sydney and our intention was to explore whether and how children became involved in central character story sessions in order to develop a teaching emerging theory about child involvement.

families and finding a story that will connect with them, for example, a child may be lent one of the kindergarten's soft toy birds to take home so that he can tell us about "the toy's adventures" later. Whilst Insert 4.2 captures evidence of all children's involvement in the central character story as a whole and the experiences those stories stimulated, Insert 4.2 does not do justice to the extent of the involvement and the richness of what we observed and felt. Some of those things just cannot be put into words. This realisation of the power of the central character concept was affirming yet at the same time it exposed the complexities of trying to write about it in a way that would do justice to the story.

Investigation 3 – looking closely at patterns of involvement

Elaine wondered whether there was any pattern to children's involvement – when they took on the role of a central character, did the more dominant take up the role, did the quieter children miss out? She took the data from Insert 4.2 together with the dates of entry for each child and drew a chart that showed when each child had entered the centre, how long they had been in the centre at any one time, and what parts they had played in Central Character story at various times. In this way of displaying data the dates of sessions appear on the horizontal axis and the length of time a child has been in the centre appears on the vertical axis. A child's 'timeline' is a diagonal line that starts at the time she/he enters the morning sessions and ends at the time the child leaves for school. Each child's activities were mapped onto the timeline. Within each session there were several entries: one child had been central character; the personal story of another child had been woven into the story that day; several other children had contributed their memories into the story line.

This analysis showed that children became involved in different ways, depending on their confidence, but all were involved. We noticed that the teachers were deliberately finding ways to involve quieter children. When Elaine showed this chart to the teachers we talked about particular patterns, like a gap in time where a particular child was not involved. Such gaps commonly occurred where a particular child had needs, perhaps related to self-confidence, that the teachers were aware of and working with. Some children, however, prefer to observe and take part from the sidelines rather than be in the limelight, and that is fine too.

Investigation 4 – how our planning worked

Investigating where the central character stories came from and the ways different teachers and children worked with the central character led to the development of central character Storyline Planning Sheets. The planning sheets were used over two terms to compare our planned and actual storylines. They recorded the spontaneity and flexibility of teachers as they responded to the moment and the situation in front of them. Insert 4.3 gives an example of a planning sheet where the team deviated from what was planned. The intended storyline, shown on the left, was to follow children's interest in rocks and to explore where limestone comes from. What actually happened, as described on the right was that a child had returned with Kakapo, one of the soft toy birds. The story about how Kakapo had got lost and was found again as part of a family game wove in with other stories to do with DOC (Department of Conservation).

The example is important because it shows how we are able to adjust our planning as we weave our stories. Now, we do not plan in writing – discussion is enough.

This work exposed our thinking and at the same time highlighted the creativity and passion that drives us in our teaching. We sparked off each other's ideas, the energy and excitement we brought to the task and the multiple story lines that we generated.

The first draft of the *Common Threads of Learning* (p. 10, above) developed from this investigation and has continued to evolve as our understanding of central character story increased.

Insert 4.3: An example of a planning sheet

15-8-06

What sparked this story

Child shaving his rocks and volcano story

Intended story line

Ana Tariuha collects shells on the sea floor over time they get squashed together. After a big earthquake the shells come up out of the ground as limestone. Manga Tariuha finds it & decides to make a sculpture for his garden out of it.

Resources required

Limestone
Files, raps, sandpaper
Ana & Manga Tariuha capes.

What happened

[redacted] came in with Kakapo who had been lost and now has a fiancée on. - A much more relevant story which he & his Mum share at group time. I then tell the story of 'The Competition' between Kakapo and Albatross who play hide and seek to decide who is going to be the leader. We continue to talk about the birds & someone mentions the possum. I ask Robin if he knows how to skin one - which he does. We later hear from him about how he used to work for D.O.C. and rescue endangered species. George then shares her new hat and hat box with us and we learn how bats live in NZ.

Resources used

- People around me
- Makeshift albatross 'costume' - white sheet
- Stories from home & the wider community.

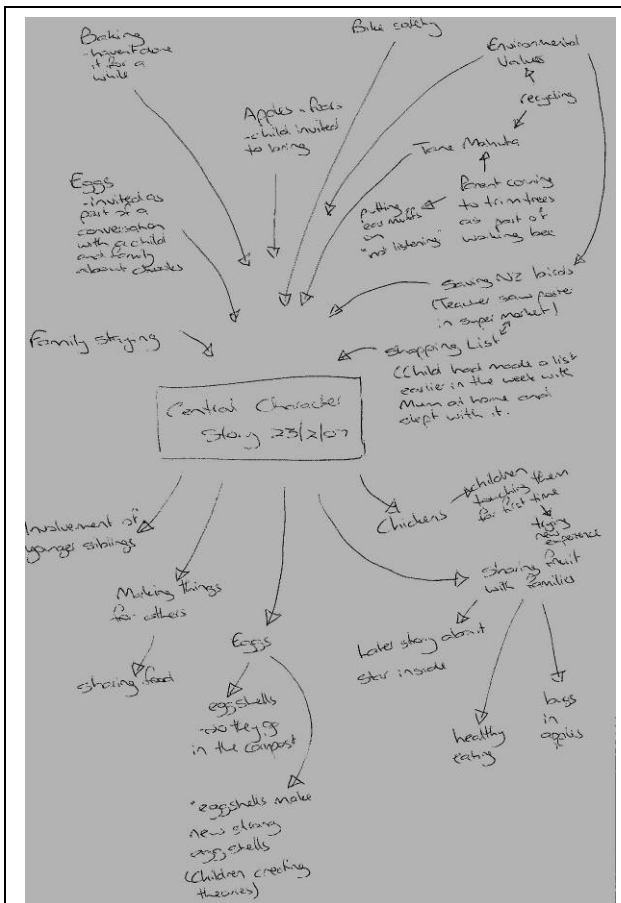
Emergent events ideas

- That a seel
- Possum killing
- Radio transmitters

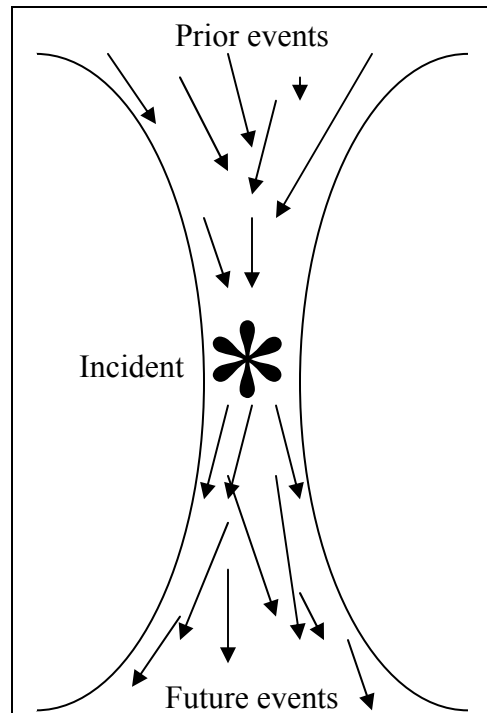
Investigation 5 - looking closely at storylines

As the understanding of our innovation increased we began to recognise the complexity of the learning which comes together through central character stories. Insert 4.4 shows the stories which flowed into one central character storyline on one particular day along with all the stories which emerged from that central character story.

This diagram shows that even though any one storyline can appear very simple to a casual observer, it carries references to a rich assembly of experiences and stories that can only be understood by those who are living with and in the community of learners that is the kindergarten. It also shows that a story that appears very simple at the time will branch out and be referred to subtly, in many future stories. This weaving of the past into the present with an eye to the future is a key feature of central character story. The central character is a tool for weaving the personal stories from different children's lives into a fabric that enables both individual and collective learning.



Insert 4.4: Things that led up to and followed on from one story incident. (23/2/07)



Insert 4.5: The hour-glass model shows that an incident within central character story draws on past events and contributes to future events.

Insert 4.5 is a stylised version of Insert 4.4. We refer to it as the hour-glass model. The hour-glass model reminds us of how difficult it is to track particular story lines, just as it is difficult to track learning of any sort. We weave our prior experiences into the

understandings of the moment, and these in turn influence our future knowledge, learning and understanding.

Through the investigations illustrated in Inserts 4.1-5, we came to realise that the teachers are constantly communicating with each other and watching the children to find ways to foster involvement as learners. We have found that character story is not a tool for mere entertainment or keeping children on the mat; it is a strategy for fostering listening, commenting, sharing ideas, developing relationships and learning together. We have found that all children are involved in different ways at different times.

4.6 An investigation into terminology: theory, dispositions and working theories

Within this project we have delved deeply into our understandings of particular words. We have come to realise that our ideas are theories.

Early in the project we discussed with advisors at UC Plus (University of Canterbury Teacher Support Services) to explore ideas about “dispositions” in order to understand more about labelling and describing learning. We foster dispositions over time, but we do not describe children’s dispositions because complex actions are too subtle to be summarised in this way.

Late in our investigations we explored Te Whāriki’s use of the phrase “working theory” because we were trying to link the knowledge, skills and attitudes contained within a story to children developing their own working theories.

The outcomes of a curriculum are knowledge, skills and attitudes. These three aspects combine together to form a child’s ‘working theory’ and help the child develop dispositions that encourage learning. (*Te Whāriki*, p. 44)

We found *Te Whāriki*’s explanation of a child’s working theories a stimulating way to describe our own understandings about teaching and learning around central character story.

Children develop working theories through observing, listening, doing, participating, discussing, and representing within activities provided in the programme. As children gain greater experience, knowledge, and skills, the theories they develop become more widely applicable and have more connecting links between them. Working theories become increasingly useful for making sense of their world, for giving the child control over what happens, for problem solving and for further learning. Many of these theories retain a magical and creative quality, and for many communities, theories about the world are infused with a spiritual dimension. (*Te Whāriki*, p. 44)

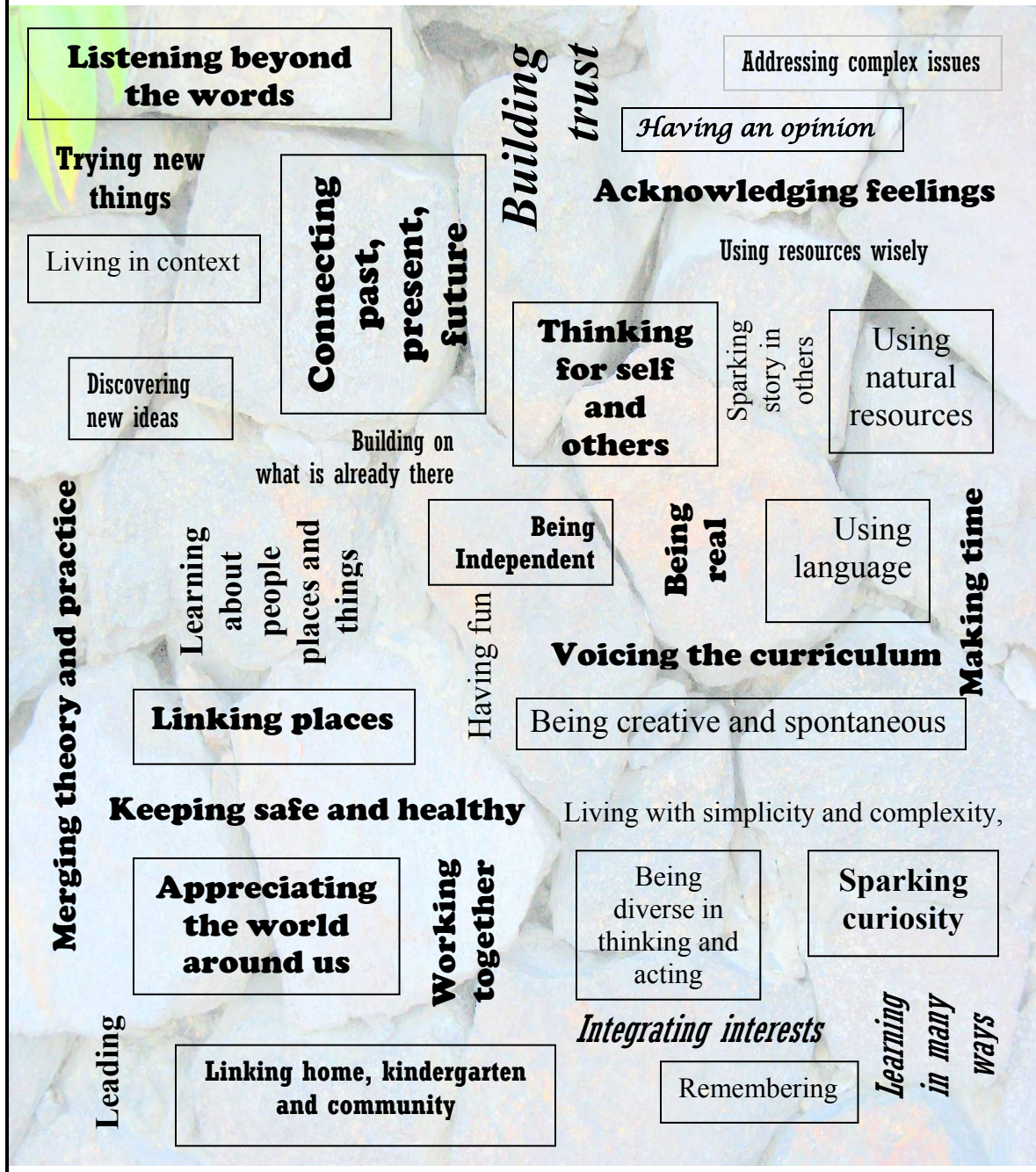
We found we had different understandings about what this meant. We realised we were talking past each other as words like ‘theory’ and ‘working theory’ were being understood differently. We developed our *Wall of Strategies* when we realised that we could not understand the detail of children’s learning theories.. All we could do is to help children to build, explore and test out their ever-emerging theories and ideas.

Insert 4.6: Wall of Strategies

For teaching: As teachers we see that the following strategies help us work with children and families to foster learning and learning dispositions for all.

For learning: As learners we see the following strategies as tools that build knowledge, skill and theory and that need to be fostered in all learners.

For everyone: We model these things through central character story and we expect that all of us, children, families and teachers will use these strategies.



4.7 *Wall of Strategies* - linking our emerging ideas about how people learn:

Through the analysis of the stories outlined in Episodes 4.1 and 4.2 we came to see how knowledge, skills and attitudes come together and provide insights through the central character concept.

The building blocks of our *Wall of Strategies* (Insert 4.6) are strategies for learning which we see underpinning central character. The ideas listed do not sit neatly under the headings of knowledge, skills and attitudes but merge together. No strategy sits alone; each sits alongside and merges with others. Together these strategies form a whole approach to learning, for adults and children. We model and teach these strategies.

We conclude that children, families and teachers develop their own ideas about themselves and about the people, places and things in their lives, and in their work. These ideas are deeply embedded in relationships and contexts that are relevant and meaningful to those involved.

The identified knowledge, skills and attitudes in Insert 4.6 enable the learning to go hand in hand with learning dispositions that we see enlivened through the use of central character story.

4.8 Insights from Bush Street on central character

Insert 4.7 summarises some of our insights - a multi-layered explanation built around the little things that sit behind central character story.

Children as storytellers (and therefore teachers)

As we brainstormed to identify the information we wanted to include in Insert 4.7, we were reminded again how strongly we believe that our children are storytellers and that, by sharing their stories and experiences, they contribute to the learning in our community. All of us, children, families and teachers are working together to build a storytelling community where all of us share questions, ideas and inspirations, and learn together within a framework of shared values.

Insert 4.7 Central character as a tool to support learning

Central character story:

- enables stories from the past to be easily woven in to present discussions
- assists parents to learn what happened at kindergarten by asking about the central character
- fosters creativity and spontaneity
- fosters conversation among the children during mat time and beyond – then these conversations go home
- enables teachers to lead children’s learning by following through on the excitements, crises or mundane events of life
- enables teachers to address issues that are sometimes avoided; for example: differing values, beliefs, cultural festivals, death.
- enables teachers to bring families into the centre as partners in teaching and learning
- allows teachers to work with children’s stories related to emotional issues
- allows teachers to support family values and experiences by celebrating stories of families and doing things together
- allows teachers to provide learning opportunities for parents and families through sharing stories about how people do various things in various ways

Central character is NOT

- a formula for teaching
- radically different from the underpinning values and philosophies found in teaching practices at many other centres – it **is** however, our own innovative approach to teaching and learning

In relation to teaching and learning, central character:

- has led to our identification and articulation of five constructs that guide our thinking
 - Web of Values
 - Common Threads of Learning
 - Environment holding history (physical, social, historical)
 - Wall of Strategies
 - Ripples of Involvement
- recognises that story (at any instant) weaves together the past experiences of the children and teachers in ways that are often not obvious to the casual observer
- recognises the central role of the teacher as storyteller and enabler of learning through story.

In relation to family support and working with families –we realise that:

- conversations at home are stimulated when parents ask the child: “What happened to (the name of central character) today?”
- central character is a tool for parent education and can be a link for families that need support
- the value and importance of teacher creativity in addressing the emerging needs of families is vital
- parents feel empowered in their role as parents as they are invited or offer to contribute to story
- parents are able to see their children as capable
- links and partnerships are created with family and community
- there is an increased sense of belonging as child/parent/ family stories are reflected through a central character storyline
- returning parents relate to the gifts or artefacts that they have left from previous children attending
- some parents develop skills transferable to school – and have the confidence to use them

4.9 Parent involvement and education

A key insight from this research concerns the work that is carried out at Bush Street to involve parents in the life of the kindergarten and to support parent learning. Insert 4.8 *Ripples of Involvement* talks about how we include parents in the daily life of the kindergarten and how we build relationships that support learning for both children and adults.

During an independent evaluation of the Centres of Innovation project, one of our parents, Hayley, reported on the impact of the kindergarten on her learning and her ability to make a difference for her children in the future as they start school. Hayley talked about becoming ‘resilient and empowered’ during her time at Kindergarten. Hayley said:

When [my child] started school I felt the school system did not allow me to have the relationship I wanted with the school, the teacher and parents. I realised I did not have to conform to the system and I started thinking about ways I could model the principles of aroha, respect and inclusiveness that I had learnt at kindergarten. I realised that by changing my attitude and situation it would offer a flow-on effect for my child and his relationship with school.

I could also develop more inclusive relationships with other parents away from the heavy structure where there is no freedom for real relationships. If I hadn't had this modelled by teachers at Bush Street that it is okay to push these boundaries I don't think I would have been brave enough.”

Through central character story, we have built strong relationships with parents. Through the culture of story within the kindergarten Hayley became stronger in her ability to act as a parent in a new setting. Through central character we had been able to support and to model the principles Hayley has identified: aroha, respect and inclusiveness. We are able to support parent education in very informal and non-threatening ways simply by involving parents in our character stories and the activities that surround them.

Sometimes we thread a parent education focus into a storyline to support better learning outcomes for children; at other times a central character storyline can incorporate some of the mandatory requirements of teaching; for example, fire and earthquake drills, or curriculum review. At all times our intentions are to *massage meaning* out of conversations and interactions and we encourage children to do the same. Differing viewpoints and ways of being can go side by side, provoking the thinking process.

A variety of complex situations can be explored through a central character. Children who have behavioural issues get a chance to see the central character exploring new ways to act or respond to situations. They can participate as the central character, or as an observer. Acting out a story through a central character shifts emotional intensity from the individual child onto the central character. The story sessions also give a place where other children can explore how to deal with behaviours they do not like. They get to see and experience new ways to deal with things and the consequences.

Insert 4.8 Ripples of Involvement

A key finding from this investigation is the attention we give to building strong relationships between the kindergarten and parents, whānau and community.

Children grow up in a social context in which parental involvement is central to their learning. The environment in which the child learns is in a constant state of flux as relationships and community influences change. Through inclusion and conversations with family members we are able to build a greater view of the child – the things he or she likes and the environments in which he or she lives and plays as well as connections we can build on.



We work to create a welcoming environment where parents and whānau want to stay and where they can, almost by accident, meet up with other people who also have young children. The gate and the kitchen are always open. There are informative wall displays, adult chairs and seating, and the opportunity to connect with outside agencies such as Presbyterian Support.

Family relationships are further strengthened at Bush Street by outings and walks in the community, morning and afternoon teas during a session, and Family Fun Nights once a term. These opportunities encourage family members to come to the kindergarten and to become familiar with the environment and the teachers. Parents are also able to meet the parents of their child's friends at these events.

In conversations with parents we discuss issues and, in an informal way, support parent education. We role-model aspects of parenting through our stories and involve parents in storytelling activities.

Parents volunteer to help the kindergarten in various ways. As their sense of being 'at home' in the kindergarten increases, they see ways to help out, such as taking a bag of washing home, organising a fundraising event, helping in the garden or spending time with the children. They may share their personal stories when they volunteer, and they may volunteer because they have been involved in personal storytelling.

Working with parents and families in these contexts builds relationships as well as opportunities for personal stories to emerge - which in turn strengthen connections between the kindergarten and home. We know that for young children to recall and reenact their stories and be able to do this well, they need their parents/ whānau to be involved and connected to the process of sharing personal stories.

We talk with parents intentionally, inviting them to tell us about meaningful events and experiences in their lives, listening for and identifying strategic stories which will enable children's interests to be brought into central character sessions, such as Mark's story about burritos.

The effectiveness of central character story for children's learning relies upon strong relationships with families and at the same time plays an integral role in the way we strengthen connections with families.

Underpinning theories

The child's learning environment extends beyond their immediate setting.

Te Whāriki (p. 19) points to Bronfenbrenner's metaphor of a set of nested Russian dolls which describes a child's learning environment and how strong links between settings support a child's development.

Complexity science and sociocultural theory point to nested and interrelated layers of learning and understanding.

Children are not the only learners in the community. Parents and teachers are learners too and we can expose our uncertainty about some behaviour with a questioning approach which acknowledges that we do not like what is happening. A sensitive issue will only be explored through the more public domain of central character story sessions when we have the permission of the parents to do so and it has been talked about between the teachers and the parents. They are aware that we are all learning together. Learning to help ourselves and be responsible for our own actions are common things that children are learning to do through central character stories.

4.10 Summary

In this chapter we explored teacher thinking around particular stories in some detail and shown the kinds of investigation we carried out to help us understand the thinking behind what we were doing.

We found that much of the work we do is intuitive and very difficult to describe. We found that language from published texts were aligned with the ways we do things and we learnt that when we unpick our personal understandings we are able to debate ideas and become much clearer about the underpinning ideas or theories that drive our practice.

The inserts are summaries of our findings. We do not claim that these summaries would be true for other centres but we find them invaluable in explaining our practice and our thinking. The process of doing the research has led us into deep understandings of our practices.

The central character teaching tool plays an important role in enabling teachers to implement an emergent curriculum where children's personal stories are woven, in a very safe way, into the collective learning of both families and the kindergarten.

Chapter 5 Emerging theories about learning for children and adults

In order to bring together our experiences and writing about children's learning through the use of a central character, we brainstormed our ideas about what children were learning in the broadest sense, within their social, environmental and historical contexts. We wrote our ideas on scraps of paper so that they would be easy to sort (see the photograph).

The six groupings that came from our analysis are reported in this chapter. These groupings fit with Schrag's (1997) model of the self after postmodernity (Insert 5.1). Schrag's four aspects have helped us develop our insights from Chapter 4 into our emerging theories. These groupings are consistent with the sociocultural philosophies that underpin *Te Whāriki*.

Through this process we came to realise the importance we place on learning for parents so that they can support children's learning. We see learning as being socially based as opposed to only an individual experience for children and adults. Nevertheless, as we will show in this chapter, it is helpful to think about the various aspects of the self as a learner.



Elaine grouping ideas as we brainstormed.

Insert 5.1: Our use of Schrag's (1997) four aspects of the self after postmodernity

Schrag (1997) has described four aspects of the self as the self in **discourse**, **action**, **community**, and **transcendence**. We have found it helpful to use Schrag's model of the "self" in but have adapted it to form six aspects.

Language and conversation (5.1). This corresponds to Schrag's notion of the self in **discourse**: a person is enabled within conversations and communications only if he or she has the language and skills to speak, listen, take part in discussions and share ideas.

Action (5.2) Schrag's notion of the self in **action** refers to the ways that people behave and to their physical abilities and the things they choose to do.

Relationships (5.3) and **community** (5.4) This corresponds to Schrag's notion of the self in community: this is so important in our work that we have divided this domain in two, one for building relationships and one for supporting and developing and coming to understand communities and how they work

Collective curiosity (5.5) - moving on and learning from experience. We have adapted Schrag's notion of **transcendence** which is to do with going beyond current understandings and beliefs to exploring, learning to learn and, in a sense, children researching their environment.

We added Curriculum (5.6) as we found that this was the best descriptor of the material which was closely linked to *Te Whāriki*.

5.1 Language and conversation

Central character stories give us a framework for our programme, and a special *place* for shared conversations to take place in addition to countless individual conversations. Everyone's story can be heard by the group when and where it is appropriate to do so. We can all *absorb* what is going on around us – children and adults together - living it and being part of it. The central character storyteller can shift focus from a serious to a non-serious storyline, familiar to unfamiliar, contentious to non-contentious, real to not real, through language. Within the story conversations, the group can explore different words and worlds and ways of saying and doing things. Central character storylines can also support the language of silence and body gesture.

Weaving together many stories from different people requires skilled facilitation of conversations and interactions to satisfy a variety of objectives. We are always asking ourselves “whose story will be heard and why?” We are aware of how important it is to develop the skill and wisdom of listening *beyond* the words to hear that which is being left unsaid (things as emotions, feelings, stress and excitement) so that the teacher can make decisions about how to enable later conversations to flow.

Adults need to manage the interactions, alongside children who are also doing the same. We recognise intuitively the appropriateness of *time* and *place* and understand that language at home might be very different from language at kindergarten. We acknowledge that for some children there may not be a place at home where they are heard.

We see story as food for the soul (Canfield, Hansen & Welanetz, 1993; Zukav, 2000).

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves. (Lopez, 1994, quoted in McCashlin, 2000¹, p. 253)

Central characters are playful: they promote play, remind us of earlier stories children have used in their play and often lead to fresh ideas. Through play, oral communication skills develop and self-confidence can soar. Play in all its forms (and being playful in the story process) gives teachers the opportunity to connect with the child within themselves and to place themselves where they know what it feels like to have their story heard or not heard. This role-modelling stimulates important conversations and helps teach the skills to speak and listen.

5.2 Action

We use action to describe the learning that comes from actively doing and behaving as distinct from that of language and conversation. The central character learns through doing the same things the children do and therefore the play equipment already in the kindergarten can be used within storylines. The strategic use of props in a central character storyline enables a simple object to become a really important part of the

¹ McCashlin (2000) credits this quotation to Brussat (1994).

action, and the storyteller can respond to the moment and connect to children's expressed interests. For example, a piece of rope was an important prop in the Term 2, 2008 central character story of Rata and Harrison. The rope became a starting point, or *link*, for children's personal stories through the central character. Because of this prop a variety of stories and conversations surfaced, from climbing, fishing, skipping, and worms to towing the car when it broke down. The central character story takes its cue from the personal story unfolding, with the props providing the impetus.

By using resources within the kindergarten during story sessions, the children are able to see and experience more diverse uses of these things. The paints and collage equipment can help create a backdrop or mural for a story; big boxes may represent a mountain or cave; pieces of blue fabric can represent the river or sea and planks can be used for bridges. Children may have been using these resources prior to story time and the central character simply supports the child into a leadership role of showing what they were doing – it may be that we all have a go, or not. Children may expand their skills by taking the props used in the central character story sessions and continuing to act out their versions of the storyline or their creations.

Through central character we can re-enact situations. Whether we call this drama, improvisation or re-enactment, the label is not as important as the process, and the reasons behind it. Central character enactments involve listening and learning, with children guiding the way alongside teachers and any adults keen to do things this way.

5.3 Building relationships

Personal stories enable rich and diverse learning between home and kindergarten and between people, places and things. This is a key way Bush Street teachers build relationships and partnerships in learning. We use *people* as a primary resource – following the principle of listening to and sharing stories from the people involved in the community. Our teaching practice honours the story within us all – children, families, teachers, visitors. We want people to feel they belong. We know that sometimes stories do not surface in the group because the time is not ripe for them to do so. Having a story meaningfully listened to gives a child a connection to the place and the people in it. Central character is the tool we use to deepen connections and relationships.

Building relationships around personal stories and central character develops the *self* as an individual, as well as the *self* within the collective group of *others*. This happens for children and adults.

As we build on children's interests through the use of a central character, we are able to shape the learning by moving the discussion - using a relationship, or a value based question.

Example: Brian's personal story shifts from Spiderman to using needle and thread.

Brian had fallen over, there was a hole in his Spiderman suit, and he was upset. As part of the central character storyline the teacher talked with the children about what could be done to fix the hole – and Mother Goose (aka Brian)

learned a new skill and had his feelings acknowledged. Mother Goose was also able to role-model, enact and act out the values of looking after things and repairing what you've got. On this occasion Mother Goose did not need a new Spiderman suit, because the old one was fine and even better because it represented, and gave evidence of, new skills that he could share with family later at home.

The teachers also come to know each other better as their stories are shared in the story times – even the really simple things about food and clothing we like, activities, family, pets and places we go on holiday. We can also share stories about things we are learning to do, like playing the guitar. Complementary stories may surface which can be used for discussion, or not. The children and families come to see the teachers as real people doing things beyond the boundaries of the kindergarten through these stories.

Little snippets of a personal story may be introduced through a central character story which can lead to later conversations among children and between children and adults – even if the connections are not made instantly. The use of a central character gives us a place to revisit prior learning and to see and hear the real connections happening.

Example: Revisiting a personal story from John, a relieving teacher at the kindergarten

Through revisiting John's story about growing vegetables on his farm, which had been part of the central character story of Rata and Harrison in Term 2, 2008, the children were able to remember and recall the different vegetables he grew. They recalled tasting these vegetables that some liked and others did not alongside discussion about how the vegetables grew and the care required. There were parallels between the vegetables in the kindergarten garden and in children's and teachers' gardens at home. When he shared his story originally, John had also briefly mentioned stoats, ferrets and weasels. What surfaced through the recall exercise was the children's memory of John's earlier story. For some, connections with John had been made to stoats, ferrets and weasels and this gave a new storyline to follow. It was later picked up in the central character of Kupe in Term 3, 2008. It is always exciting when these things happen because it highlights how informed, intuitive listening to children, combined with creativity, helps to plan, change and execute an exciting emergent programme.

This example also highlights the role of reciprocal relationships that promote the art of both listening and contributing. When a story is shared through the central character, the ownership of the story is shared by the group as everyone's stories have helped shape and develop the central character. Past stories are easy to recall as the children can look at the photos of these story lines to help them remember. When teachers and children look, together, at earlier photographs and a teacher says "I wonder what [name of central character] was doing here," it stimulates great discussions and exposes thinking and imagination.

5.4 Community

To be part of a community is to know about it – the people, the places and the things in it. We get to know people by listening to their stories and sharing stories within our communities. We recognise that personal stories often expose accounts of places and things in our community or further afield, so are a good starting point for relationship and community building. As we listen, and share of ourselves, we learn the art of hospitality. We get to know names of others and contexts in which they live and play. To be part of a community is to contribute, and in order to get to know about the other members in the community, there is a need to listen. Listening well entails gauging when it is appropriate to be quiet and when it is appropriate to speak. Central Character story sessions give us the place and the time to assist young children with developing their identities as part of a community.

Central character stories help us, and the children and their families, understand and build our community as we enjoy our shared creativity around the stories. Our understanding of our particular community expands as we listen to personal stories and contribute to shared public stories. Developing storylines involves us moving beyond the kindergarten where we can experience the reality of the socio-historical stories we have enacted at kindergarten. The details of this are given in chapter 4. When we go on excursions we invite families to join us so they get to experience the stories as well. Trips always involve story in a relevant context. Trips help to consolidate the kindergarten child's learning as they weave learning contexts together meaningfully.

Example: Needing more containers for the collage area.

Social issue: How do we get children and families to know about natural places and expose environmental and cultural issues through the stories we share and learn from?

The degradation of nature can happen through ignorance and from people never having had an opportunity to experience and appreciate the stories that nature gives us.

Teacher thinking: I want to have new woven baskets for the collage area – I want to involve the children and families in this.

We could hire a bus and go on a trip to the river to cut harakeke which can be woven into rourou. Through this story, we will come to know about the protocol of cutting and working with harakeke – we will also come to know about the bird life and the history of the area through our stories. We could also go to the beach to collect natural resources and then have some games on the beach and run up and down the sandhills. Parents and whānau can also come so they too experience nature, and the stories we will share. We can have a weaving workshop at the kindergarten to follow this. Adults and children get to know each other as they work and play together

What happened: In association with the central characters of Julie and Andrew and the learning thread of favourite things, in term 1 2008, a trip was made to the river and the beach, with parents, grandparents, teachers and children playing and learning together – and we did the things outlined above.



Pictures from the trip to the beach to gather harakeke

All our central character stories provide a framework to build on children's, families' and teachers' stories. We extend the story line by going into the community to experience the reality of their stories and for teachers to role model ways of being together which involve fun, appreciation and learning. It is all about simple things – but really important ones in today's complex, busy world.

As the awareness of self and others increases through central character stories, more complex stories can be explored - learning that people have different beliefs and viewpoints and that it is important to respect difference. For example, people have different beliefs about Christmas, Ramadan, 9/11 and ANZAC Day, to name a few. During story times we are able to demonstrate a respect for difference and not shy away from discussing things that some people find hard to talk about – acknowledging the humanity and the complexity of these situations. Through story we are able to bring these things into a familiar context and make them meaningful and relevant for children. It is a way to bring complex situations into our shared reality.

5.5 Collective curiosity

Thinking matters. Time for thinking is honoured and silences do not need to be filled. Mark's story, Episode 1 provides an illustration of the importance of silence in providing space for personal stories to emerge. To be curious and questioning provides limitless opportunities and that is why central character, personal stories, emergent curriculum and programme planning go hand in hand.

Inquiry and questioning can be fostered so that they contribute to good relationships. Intriguing storylines can trigger questions at home about what the central character did that day as the story shifts the pressure from a child to remember what he or she did at kindergarten during the day to something the central character did. Family members can learn about the central characters. They can support children's memory, recall and linking of stories with experience. The processes foster curiosity when conversations at home begin to complement a central character story. Children start asking questions supported by teachers who are encouraging them to do so. Sometimes when the children recall central character stories the photos or pages of the written records of a story are used as a prompt. At times, teachers encourage the children to brainstorm the

things they know about a central character – this encourages collective knowledge construction as new ideas emerge alongside old ones.

At other times, teachers facilitate investigations into unknown territory. In investigations, we are comfortable, indeed pleased about not being sure where things are going. We use and learn from whatever occurs naturally in the environment. Carlina Rinaldi at Reggio Emilia, has a similar view. She says learning “is constructed through contemporaneous advances, standstill and “retreats” that take many directions” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 131)

Example: A quilt being made as part of the story of Grandpa Sydney

One of the props used was a bed as part of the central character story of Grandpa Sydney to support children in preparing for bed at night and getting ready in the morning. There had been some issues for parents over these things. James came in one day with some quilting his mother had done for him using lots of different fabrics. James was keen to show off his gift and to talk about how his mum uses a sewing machine. The idea of a quilt for Grandpa Sydney’s bed developed. James’s mother was invited in with her sewing machine and all the children were invited to bring along a special piece of fabric that could be cut and sewn into a new quilt for Grandpa Sydney’s bed. The pieces of fabric which came in all had a story to tell, from an old favourite T shirt to a piece of a cuddly blanket. The big picture of creating the quilt was not as important as the stories developed along the way as part of the process. The mother later commented, “It made me feel more a part of the place.”

5.6 Links to curriculum

As we analysed what children were learning via central character stories, we realised we were creating our own story curriculum, appropriate for the socio-cultural and historical context of Rangiora, using the framework provided by *Te Whāriki*. Within this document the term curriculum is defined as:

The sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10)

Our story curriculum fosters learning in relation to people, places and things, and the threads of learning that give environment and historical perspectives. It integrates social learning and children learning to listen, talk, ponder new ideas and join in. Many of these elements are common practice. The use of central character story is not. An analysis of the John and Jane story in 2006 showed clear links to all the strands and principles of *Te Whāriki*. We also identified some core values which underpin our teaching practice and some threads of learning. Later analyses showed that these are part of all central character stories. Central character story processes provide for complex learning through seemingly simple daily events.

We came to realise that we are creating a living environment that supports children and adults to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes through central character stories.

5.7 Summary

In this chapter we have shown that central character stories sit comfortably within the framework of *Te Whāriki* alongside Schrag's understandings about the nature of the self. The chapter has highlighted, yet again, how the teaching innovation of character story supports the growth of children's learning within the kindergarten and also within families and the community.

The examples in this chapter show how great a focus this centre puts on the learning of families and their engagement together, with each other, together, in community. By sharing stories about trips to the sand hills, gathering harakeke and inviting a mother to share her interest in sewing, teachers have shown in this chapter how the kindergarten fosters children's learning through parental involvement.

Chapter 6 How we did it: Research as collective learning within praxis

“Trust the process” (Bush Street saying, 2007)

The challenge in this research was to capture teacher thinking, to identify our underlying assumptions, and look for and address our blind-spots. In this chapter we describe the innovative processes we used to gather and analyse our data. Because we view the spaces in which we work (and live and think) in sociocultural terms (Rogoff, 1998, Fler, 2006), we see our research as being grounded in collective learning. We addressed the challenge of documenting teacher thinking by developing a process of writing “one-pagers” in which we document, very briefly, our thinking around just one point or issue (Mayo, Henson & Smith, 2008). When one-pagers are shared with others, they open up fresh discussion, insight and questioning. The one-pagers became the unit of analysis in our investigations into central character story. No matter what issue or excitement arose, we could record it quickly and informally as we jotted down our thinking, or we could slow down and think deeply. The object in either case was to write insightfully about an aspect of our work. This report is, effectively, a summary of the insights we have gained by documenting our thinking within one-pagers. In this chapter we explain how we came to “trust the process” of using one pagers to clarify our thinking and record our collective learning. Our learning, like a braided river (see Insert 6.1), may seem to ramble, but when we come together we find our collective knowledge has grown. We often took different paths but we were heading in similar directions and met ourselves further down the track.

Insert 6.1 A braided river as a metaphor for research and learning



This view of the Harper River in the Canterbury high country shows the meandering braids of the river against a backdrop of mountains and rugged terrain.

We see our journey as a Centre of Innovation as comparable with the journey of the waters of the Harper. Each braid has a potential myriad of routes to follow across the gravel plain. Where individual braids combine the current becomes stronger. We celebrate the braids of individual thought that vary from the main streams but are still part of the same river.

The image represents our journey of understanding, both of central character story and of our research story, and it also grounds us in the realities of our lives, our connections to Canterbury and the magic of the New Zealand landscape.

In this chapter we discuss our praxis as a team of researchers. Praxis is a key word because it reminds us that we are concerned with blending theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge so that both knowledge systems gain from the process. At the same time, praxis reminds us that the purpose of this work is social good: through praxis we

aim to address social inequity. We were adamant, for example, that this research report be written in a way that is accessible to teachers (we are restricting its size and deliberately using a variety of strategies to make the document attractive and portable). At the same time we aim to report on our learning in this project in ways that will impact on educational policy-making and future research into educational practice.

6.1 Research overview

Kay and Helen began working on this project in 2005 by applying to become a Centre of Innovation. During 2006 when Ali Wegner from Christchurch College of Education was the research associate the team worked systematically on gathering and analysing data from video recordings of central character sessions and focus group interviews with parents. Through this work the teachers identified the values that underpin their practice (see Chapter 2) and established methodical practices in recording and analysing data. After an institutional merger, and a period without a research associate, Elaine took over the role in May 2007.

Methodology This research sits in an action research framework where the critique of current practice leads to change within the project. As is shown in section 6.2 (below), this research is informed by ideas from sociocultural, pragmatic, complexity and post-structural theories. Learning is understood within this project as being to do with developing habits of mind or learning dispositions and working theories; learning is active and holistic; it links knowledge, skills and attitudes (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 44). This is in line with post-structural thinking where “Knowledge becomes the ability to perform effective actions” (Kvale, 1996, p. 19). *Te Whāriki* highlights the four broad principles of empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships: this research is grounded in the same principles. The partnerships and processes we have developed within this project show the relevance of sociocultural thinking to research methodology: we have come to view research as “collective knowledge construction within a community of praxis” (Bush Street insight, November, 2008).

Methods When we say that one-pagers have been our unit of analysis we mean that our various investigations into specific questions have been summarised into one-pagers and that we continue to add one-pagers into our data as fresh insights emerge during our analysis. Some of our detailed methods of data gathering and analysis are documented throughout this report. In chapter 3, for example, we described some of the ways we have used tools to clarify our understanding of central character, chapter 4 traced the emergence of our *Wall of Strategies* (p. 42) and chapter 5 described how we used a brainstorming process to identify key learning outcomes for children.

Ethical considerations Ethical approval for this project was obtained initially from Christchurch College of Education (2006) and latterly from University of Canterbury. The parents/caregivers of all the children attending the kindergarten were informed about the process and permission was sought for their children to be involved in the programme. In every case where a child’s image is used within any publication the parents have given approval for the image. Except where parents have requested

otherwise, all children's names within this document are pseudonyms. The names of all adults are real and used with the full knowledge of the person concerned.

6.2 Praxis-oriented research: merging theory and practice

One-pagers have allowed us to call on all sorts of ideas and theories as we grapple with understanding what is happening around us. This project has been underpinned by a variety of theoretical understandings of praxis-oriented research which includes:

Critical, emancipatory approaches Action research involves us in being critical about our own practice. We like the term "emancipatory" because it highlights the idea that this kind of research is about creating a fair and just society where people are not disadvantaged because of their gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, where they were born, etc. Within research the word "critical" has high status (a critical friend is one who helps you). Smyth (1992, p. 295) identifies four questions (see Insert 6.2) that are at the heart of critical research.

These questions challenge us, as researchers, (1) to describe what we do in practice, (2) to become informed by questioning how these actions might be understood and how they impact on the lives of

Insert 6.2: Smyth's four critical questions

- (1) Describe - what do I do?
- (2) Inform - what does this mean?
- (3) Confront - how did I come to be like this?
- (4) Reconstruct - how might I do things differently?

other people, (3) to confront the assumptions we carry and to identify the social structures that encourage us to act in ways that are not emancipatory, and (4) to ask how we might act differently, politically, strategically so that our actions are more socially just. This is praxis-oriented research because each of the participants is actively thinking about how his or her individual actions and words impact on those with whom they work and about how to work collectively to foster social justice.

Self-organising systems This research recognises the importance of understanding the complexity of self-organising systems (Johnson, 2001; Mayo, 2003; Davis and Sumara, 2006); it conceptualises collective learning as a self-organising system where the free flow of information enables the collective to adapt, continually, to changing circumstances. Within self-organising systems we see that patterns of change vary over time. The braided river photo (Insert 6.1) reminds us that some things, like the mountains and scree slopes, change slowly over centuries; other things like the plants and snow cover, have an annual cycle; the flow of water changes moment by moment. Similarly, education can be seen holistically as changing over time: we have little effect on cultural practices (the change over centuries) yet we are trying to look holistically at the learning of children and, by looking back over the years at the changes we make on a day to day basis, we are trying to ensure that our teaching addresses both long-term and short-term educational goals. As well as seeing the individual child as a learner, we see the whole education system as a learning system to which we can contribute. Complexity thinking reminds us that social problems are "wicked problems" that cannot be *solved* – they need to be *re-solved* over and over again. "Societal systems have no goals to be achieved, rather they have relations to be maintained" (Skyttner, 1996, p. 248).

Knowledge as emergent This research conceptualises knowledge as emerging both within the individual learner and within the community as a learning entity as ideas are constantly tested for their validity. Knowledge grows as we build patterns of understanding around our experiences – this applies to infants learning to speak and to researchers who notice patterns within their observations. Knowledge *emerges* in praxis. “The movement from low-level rules to higher-level sophistication is what we call emergence” (Johnson, 2001, p. 18).

Complicated vs complex Complicated machines, like cars, can be understood by pulling them apart and examining their complicated components. Complex systems on the other hand cannot be understood in this way: when we look at component parts of complex systems they are just as complex as the original. (Davis & Sumara, 2006). In this study we have seen how the complexity of the curriculum is echoed in the complexity of the teaching in a term through central character, and in the daily stories and in the decision making of the moment. None of these time spans can be broken into simple component parts, yet by looking at them all as nested entities we can see how our understanding of one level informs our understanding of others.

“Both/and” rather than “either/or” Within the social sciences (unlike some of the physical sciences) there are no “best” theories. Instead of seeking a single explanatory model in this research we have checked out the usefulness of a variety of models and used those that have enabled us to better understand or explore our ideas. This fits well with a pragmatic approach to understanding knowledge: Cherryholmes (1999) argues that pragmatism is an approach that lets us work toward the kind of future we would like. This approach to understanding the value of theory fits well with emancipatory descriptive research such as this where we are seeking to understand our praxis.

Imagery, metaphor, narrative As described in chapter 2, story is a powerful educational tool – it both fosters individual learning and carries cultural messages from generation to generation. We have used imagery and metaphor extensively to help us clarify where our understandings are shared and how our thinking differs. We have found our understanding of issues increases if we ask “What works about this metaphor, and why?” and “Where does this metaphor break down?” For example, we value the braided river metaphor because we see that while the pattern of braids seems similar they are actually very different: this helps us explain the similarities and variations in our patterns of thinking. Creativity and innovation in the way we worked and played with ideas and metaphor have kept our enthusiasm and interest up.

Working in a third space In this project the teachers, Kay and Helen, were the teacher researchers and the research associate, Elaine, had the job of supporting them and guiding them in their action research. We came from different backgrounds and we were trying to develop fresh knowledge around our research questions. Late in the process we found it useful to think about our work in terms of Bhabba’s (1994) notion of a third space which is created when two different cultures interact: Kay and Helen work together as teachers in a kindergarten where the purpose is to support children’s learning; Elaine is an academic researcher who had no specialist knowledge of early childhood education; together we built a space where our knowledge and experiences have generated fresh understandings in our third space which is this project. We do not

need to become experts in the spaces of the others, but we all have specialist expertise to bring to our shared space in which we create fresh thinking. This understanding has given us the flexibility to be confident and creative in our work of describing central character.

Praxis-oriented research Praxis is a term that reminds us that in this research we are actively investigating (a) our practices as teachers and researchers and (b) the impact of our actions on those around us: we are actively critiquing and modifying our practices as we learn about their impact. As part of these investigations we are also (c) seeking out the ideas of others, through conversation and by reading: we are seeking different points of view and adjusting our thinking as we learn. Praxis also refers to social justice and the notion that (d) our words and actions are geared toward overcoming injustice and inequity. These ideas resonated for all three of us: we came to realise that at a very deep level we had similar ideas about why we treasure education.

6.3 One-pagers as a research tool

Because we had the theoretical strength of understanding a praxis-oriented approach to research, and had experience of New Beginnings Preschool's Centre of Innovation Project (Wright, Ryder and Mayo, 2006), Kay and Helen were freed to play with their ideas and sort out how to describe their teaching. We needed to get in the habit of noticing the detail of what we did, questioning why we acted in particular ways, spotting times when we acted differently from the norm, talking openly about troublesome thoughts, exploring our underpinning assumptions, and documenting all of this. No small challenge! We dreamed up the idea of one-pagers (Henson, Smith & Mayo 2008).

Because many varied ideas were flowing and our conversations bubbled, we needed to document the key ideas; we decided to record our ideas on single pages of paper. This strategy would allow us to focus on one braid in the river, rather than the overall emerging pattern of collective knowledge. We could deal with one point at a time and produce documents that could be sorted in various ways. The page could have any format at all, from scribbled to word processed, but it had to address only one issue or idea. If it was a simple idea, the page might have very few words on it. If it was a summary of a collective brainstorming session on the links between *Te Whāriki* and an incident within a particular character story then the page might look like a series of bullet points. A particularly tricky situation might lead to several one-pagers in which the incident might be described, or some emotional reactions documented. A one-pager might be a thoughtful reflection of how the other person might be feeling. In some cases three people wrote one-pagers about the same planning issue and then discussed their different views and made a joint decision. Sometimes visitors, parents and student teachers contributed one-pagers around their experiences.

The one-pager approach worked really well for us. Kay uses her writing to clarify her thinking and to grapple with emerging ideas: she writes lots of one-pagers because it suits her style. Helen thinks about issues and writes one-pagers around the areas where we need documentation that we identify as important: she writes fewer one-pagers because she likes to write for a specific purpose; it suits her style. Elaine writes one-

paggers when they are needed strategically and can be used in several places (in other research projects, for example): one-pagers suit her style. Weaving our one paggers like merging the braids in a river, more one-pagers are generated as the collective is strengthened by the individual writing.

One-pagers were a tool for research but they are not research reports – they provided the insight that makes writing a report easier because we have sorted the ideas and the analyses and how they relate to other items (synthesis). The data is at hand, and the writing becomes easier.

6.4 Research as collective learning within praxis

In this chapter we have introduced many ideas that contribute to the theoretical underpinning for this research. We recognise that the ideas have not been discussed in detail (limited space allows for no more) and that this kind of calling on post-structural and emergent theorising is not common in reports such as this. We suggest, however, that this project demonstrates the potential of praxis-oriented research such as this to generate valuable insights into effective practice that are of value to other teachers. At the same time, it demonstrates the potential, the value, of teachers and university academics collaborating to grapple with fundamental issues to do with improving teaching and learning

“Tip the bucket” is another Bush Street phrase that has become central to our work. It expresses the realisation that often, as we construct new ideas and understanding, more learning will arrive to change the shape of what we have already assembled. Kay and Helen devoted the cover of one of the milestone reports (see the photograph) to an image of sand being tipped over their very excellent work in building a sand castle.

Helen’s reflections

Initially, we thought the purpose of the COI project was to fill the ‘bucket’ with ideas and our research would be complete when the bucket was full. However, through questions from each other and visitors and others in the programme the bucket of ideas was often tipped upside down and our carefully placed thoughts poured out. We were often surprised at what was created in this process, painful though it was. The process of tipping often added to previous ideas; sometimes it covered them to be rediscovered later. It took many bucket tippings for us to realise it was safe to put things in the bucket and have it tipped and rearranged – it was part of the research process. The process of bucket-tipping allowed us to explore our thinking more deeply and from many different angles.



The sandcastle is ever changing and not what we originally planned, but we are often surprised when we look back and see what has been formed.

6.5 Summary of our approach to research

In this chapter we have shown how a praxis-base approach to research focuses on building collective knowledge through the sharing of experience.

This approach has allowed us to use story to tell our own story. It has allowed us to foster and celebrate the emergent creativity of central character stories.

Our research story evolved. Through central character story children, families and teachers learn the value of connections among past, present and future as well as connections to people, places and things.

Central character story allows us to weave many personal story strands into an ongoing collective narrative.

This research has also opened up a fresh methodological approach to data gathering and analysis. We have shown that focusing on one idea at a time allows busy teachers to document and record complex ideas in ways that are both manageable and purposeful.

Chapter 7: Findings, insights and implications

Central character develops a community of learners which extends beyond the kindergarten. It impacts on children, families, teachers and others and its use enables and heightens learning and leading potential for all.

This chapter has two parts. The first addresses the first three research questions and summarises the findings that have been described in previous chapters.

In the second part we address the fourth question by discussing some of the key insights that emerged as part of the research process. We conclude with the words of a parent and child reflecting on their time at kindergarten.

7.1 Our findings in relation to our first three research questions

Within this research project we have identified that central character comes out of the experiences and creativity of the teachers, and develops further through the stories children, parents, whānau, visitors bring to the kindergarten. These stories grow out of the incidents that experienced teachers recognise as having curriculum potential and choose to highlight as they work with the children and families. Creating an environment together is an important feature of central character stories. We

have found that we work together to build a community connected to the kindergarten at Bush Street. A central character is a tool for engaging the children, their parents and the teachers in a learning triad where all three groups grow and learn concurrently. We have found by investigating central character story how all of us are learning together, and that we are learning about the things that are most important to us at the time. What we learn about is put forward by any of the people connected to the story times. How it is woven in is often (but not exclusively) managed by the teachers. Story lines allow us to address social issues and personal problems in ways that are both non-threatening and memorable. They also allow us to have fun and explore a wide range of subject matter. Our community has learnt that central character story provides an approach to implementing *Te Whāriki* as part of the programme. It can address current urgent issues, excitements and pressures. Central characters can repeat key ideas in ways that avoid tedious repetition: by linking past stories with the present we weave, together, a culture of ongoing learning.

7.2 Our learning about teaching, families and community

In this section we discuss five aspects of our work that raise questions about ongoing teacher education and practice. In each case we wondered about the implications of these insights and sought comment on them during the process of dissemination.

The research questions.

1. Where does central character story come from and what directs it?
2. How does central character story evolve?
3. What do children, families and teachers learn through central character story?
4. What has this kindergarten community learnt through investigating the use of central character story?

Underpinning philosophies

Our key constructs (*Environment Holding History, Web of Values, Common Threads of Learning, Wall of Strategies, Ripples of Involvement*) underpin our practice when we use *central character as a tool to support learning* (p. 45). We have found that our investigations into central character story have given us a lens through which to view our practice. We see that the underpinnings of central character stories also underpin the whole of our practice. Even though we do not use central character in our afternoon sessions with younger children we find that the same five key constructs permeate all our teaching.

One of our insights from this project is the importance of identifying and agreeing on key constructs as we thought deeply about our work. We were not told which things to explore and develop; the ones we wrote about emerged as being important at different points in the project. This is important because it gives people a common ground from which to work, a common point of understanding that weaves the people and the practices in this Kindergarten with *Te Whāriki*; it gives points of agreement around which to be confident in actions and practices. The key constructs are a base around which it is possible for teachers to weave their creativity, secure in the knowledge that their work (no matter how unexpected) is in line with the underpinning philosophy of that team. This is a process that happens over time and is ongoing: philosophies change and grow as teams acknowledge their day to day learning and when teams work through sticky issues and differences in understanding.

We see the use of central character story is a tool for our place and time at Bush Street; it is not intended as a formula for teaching in other centres even though it works well for us. It is the development of underpinning philosophies that is of key importance to teaching teams. We wonder about the implications of these ideas for (a) teacher education in colleges and universities and (b) ongoing centre development. The difficulties around and the importance of clarifying key underpinning philosophies within early childhood teams need further exploration. In what ways are centres currently working together around shared beliefs? We have found investigating our work invaluable.

Teacher as a leader of learning

The adult teachers in the centre have an overview of many things happening within the kindergarten and the community. Teachers are able to choose among, and weave together, strands from the many possible stories that could be told. We have become very aware of the key role a teacher plays in directing the flow of a story. We see this control of the flow as being an important responsibility for an adult who is leading or facilitating the learning within the large group part of the session. For most of a session children engage in their own chosen activities and teachers build on their interests.

We have been challenged around the notion that the central character story is teacher-directed and we have justified this in chapter 4. We recognise the tension between free play and teacher-directed activity and suggest that character story practice is one “re-resolution” of this “wicked problem”

Teacher thinking and writing

We have found that the one-pager way of documenting thinking has led to possibilities of writing about our thinking in a way that is manageable. By documenting our ideas informally we are able to bring them together to identify common points of understanding and to explore subtle differences in thinking. Such writing can record and clarify conversations and provides the basis for further discussion and clarification. Writing one-pagers is a short punchy way of meeting a variety of purposes and opening up conversations to include those who are less forthcoming with their ideas. We will continue to use this kind of writing as a way of pulling together different people's ideas into shared reports, for recording professional development, and inviting parent comment and contribution.

We see this way of approaching data collection for research or report writing as having advantages that go beyond this project and wonder how the sector might, in the future, use similar strategies. We see this as an approach that fosters teacher creativity and articulation. This is a move beyond a "tick the boxes" or "fill in the box" approach to teacher accountability. This approach echoes the development of learning stories from something that tended to be formulaic to something more creative.

Focus on parent education, involvement and learning

As we concluded this report we wrote a key concept page about parent involvement and education (*Ripples of Involvement*, p. 47, above). We realise that much of our thinking is about children in relation to their families, daily lives, and experiences. Character story is a tool we use to draw in and involve families. It has been helpful in enabling us to draw in those parents who avoid, or are shy of, participating in their child's learning, or do not know how.

We see the involvement of parents and informal parent education and support as one of the most important aspects of our teaching because of the impact it has, not only on children, but also on the competence and confidence of parents. The kind of learning partnership we aspire to is built on relationships around meaningful conversations that are relevant to the parent: such conversations build trust between parties. Central character allows the teachers to open up and continue these conversations in a non-threatening way while at the same time modelling new patterns of thinking.

Arguably, parent education is one of the key strategies for addressing New Zealand's endemic social problems related to nurturing and caring for the self-esteem of our young people. We wonder whether the holistic approach to the curriculum that flows through character story might be relevant to parent education in other settings, both within early childhood education and beyond.

Emerging knowledge in an active community

All of the insights we have discussed above are based on an understanding of learning as being emergent and ongoing: there are no final answers, only "wicked problems" that need to be addressed over and over again, in context, by teachers who are creative and skilled problem-solvers. All the stories we weave occur at an instant in time, yet they are built on our past experiences and knowledge and will continue in various

forms into the future. Similarly, this report represents our thinking in December 2008, based on our experiences in the past, and we are confident our ideas will continue to grow into the future. We see this reality as reflecting the understanding that educators are all, all the time, learners who are working together to make meaning that will support the learning of children and their families.

At the heart of this project we are seeking to build learning within our community. It also happens that we are able to use the strategies to address the “wicked” social problems we encounter. These cannot be formulaic solutions, and will always rely on teacher experience and expertise - the ways we address them are emerging constantly within praxis.

At the end, we are not so sure whether it is central character story itself that supports collective learning, or whether it is something more subtle. We have found that what really matters are the ways teachers foster a sense of history and wellbeing by making shared values visible and by fostering healthy and respectful relationships. Whatever it is, the discussions are ongoing because we see both ourselves and our communities as constantly learning and adapting within a culture based on the values expressed in *Te Whāriki*.

Insert 7.1 The voice of a parent and child on the impact of central character

We end our report with some writing that has been gifted to us by a family about the impact of central character stories on the learning of the family. Abby (her real name) and her mother both wrote to us. This kind of writing reminds us of how central character story enables us to weave together personal stories from the lives of children in ways that support learning at kindergarten and at home. Children's personal stories can be at the heart of the learning for all of us, adults and children, because, as Abby reminds us, a central character story allows us to blend imagination and truth, and because the stories are memorable, fun, and easy to talk about.

*I wanted to let you know what an ongoing impact Bush Street Kindy has had on our family. Abby **often** reminisces about her time there (which is saying something, considering she's now been at school for 18 months!). As Abby's grandparents were also very involved with transporting her to and from sessions, they are also more than happy to reminisce with us (and they also have a unique perspective about what impacted and affected Abby during her times at kindy, depending on who was doing the collecting!).*

*We all loved the way that the stories evolved dependant on the participation of parents/family, children and teachers. Abby **loved** playing the role of the characters from time to time. None was more special than the day when she was Professor Plum, and they were baking a cake for Christmas (she really related to this character, as she too loves to explore and experiment within the world). To this date she still looks at baking as a scientific experiment!! Another outcome from one of the stories, is that whenever we have a power-cut (which to Abby's mind, isn't nearly often enough!) she goes to the effort of collecting up as many candles as she can (in fact, she's been known to want the drapes closed so that we can tell stories by candlelight).*

Another wonderful memory that we all cherish is the day that Abby decided to draw a plan of the kindy. It wasn't just the plan that was special, but the way that the teachers took it up and ran with it! She felt valued, and encouraged – and to this day she continues to draw her architectural/landscaping plans. I have no doubt that the story-telling at kindy has had a long-lasting effect on her, and us as a family. We still look at her kindy folder, and are transported back in time to the days where Christmas-time was quintessentially Kiwi, camping was cool, and combi-vans and vegetable gardens were even cooler!

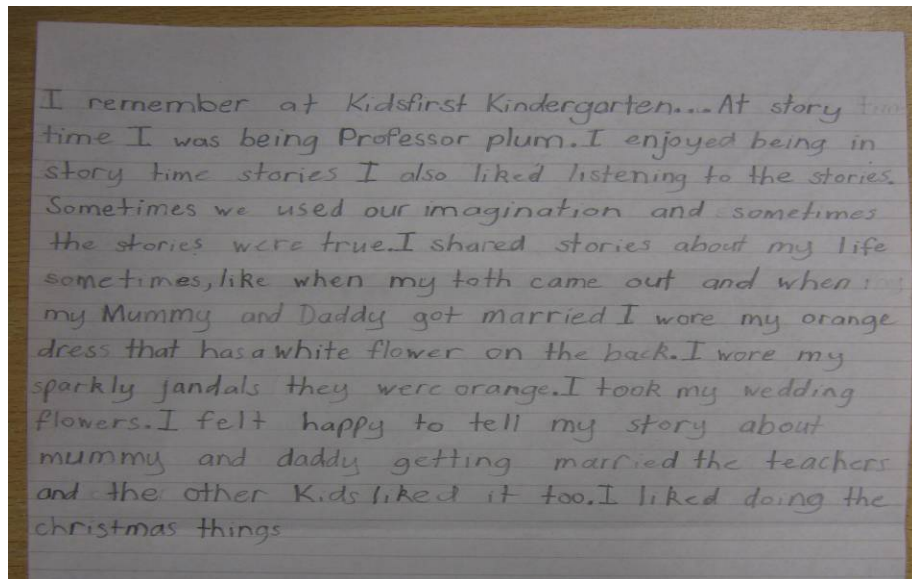
On a personal note – I've never had so much fun, as when we walked (in convoy) to the Christmas party – and all of the characters were there, along with the suitcase of memories and of course Professor Plum!! ☺

Insert 7.2 Abby's recollections

Abby's writing as a six-year old shows her memories of kindergarten; it shows her memories of character story; it shows how she enjoyed sharing her personal stories from home.

I remember at Kidsfirst Kindergarten ... At story time I was being Professor Plum. I enjoyed being in story time stories I also liked listening to the stories.

Sometimes we used our imagination and sometimes the stories were true. I shared stories about my life sometimes, like when my tooth came out and when Mummy and Daddy got married I wore my orange dress that has a white flower on the back. I wore my sparkly jandals they were orange. I took my wedding flowers. I felt happy to tell my story about mummy and daddy getting married and the teachers and the other Kids liked it too. I liked doing the Christmas things.



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Glossary of terms

Harakeke- flax

Hui - gathering of people, meeting

Korari –flower-stem of flax

Kupe –discoverer, with Ngahue of New Zealand

Pounamu – greenstone, jade

Poutini – personified form of greenstone, character in story about the West Coast of New Zealand

Rourou – small food basket

Tane Mahuta – Guardian of the forest in Māori folk lore

Taniwha – mythical creature –often guardian of waterways

Waka - canoe

Whakapapa – history, lineage

Whānau – family in a broad sense – including extended family

Bush St insights/sayings As part of our processes we have developed some sayings that have special meanings for us; they are part of our enjoyment of researching together as a group. We hope you enjoy them and that they give you some insight into our ways of working.

Introducing Kay Henson

I have always followed my passions in my work. Kindergarten teacher training when I left school saw me teach in different locations until I started my own family. Living in a rural community without any early childhood services introduced me to the Playcentre movement. Following on my interest in children who are bright yet underachieve at school, I trained as a Specific Learning Difficulties tutor. Around this work I was given opportunities to also work for the Early Childhood Development Unit doing Parent Support Work with families not reaching early childhood centres. My involvement with my family and the challenges and celebrations I continue to share with them will always be my greatest motivator. It is from this base that I learned about doing justice to the really important little things that collectively make such a difference in people's lives.

Introducing Helen Smith

I have always been interested in young children and supporting them to have time to enjoy childhood, and to find out about things, just as my Mother supported me. After a time of teaching in various geographical and early childhood educational settings I was appointed to the position of teacher at Kidsfirst Kindergartens Bush Street at the beginning of 2004. It was here I was introduced to the idea of central character story. It gelled with my interest in building on emergent ideas, on being able to support children's interests while at the same time being able to introduce children to some of my interests and experiences. Together, through this type of story, we were all able to teach, share and learn.

Introducing Elaine Mayo

My career has taken me through secondary school mathematics teaching and leadership, working as a maths adviser then for the Education Review Office and latterly as a lecturer and researcher in teacher education. Throughout my career I have been interested in learning and how to foster learning. Latterly my interest has been around learning that happens collectively when teachers share ideas and when individuals and communities work together in ways that allow them to adapt to change. This project has given me the opportunity to test out the kinds of research that can be carried out by practitioners and support collective learning.

Introducing a team of three

The more we have worked together the more we have come to realise that this is a joint project. We see ourselves, within this project, as an entity with an identity. The project members have been like a three legged stool – not much use without the others. The expectation that teachers will lead the research has provided a model that enables collaboration across sectors.



Kay, Helen and Elaine