

A collaborative cross-government action research to understand the barriers and enablers to partnership working in Aotearoa/NZ

A Good Start in Life

**Nāu te rourou, nāku te
rourou, ka ora te iwi.**

SUMMARY REPORT

(Aug 2016 – Oct 2017)

**What it
Takes**





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Finally, we would like to thank SKIP who generously funded us to contribute this project to **A Good Start in Life**.



Ma whero ma pango ka oti ai te mahi

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Scope of Summary report

What it Takes – Aotearoa/NZ Ltd aims to offer a **summary document** detailing the 'A Good Start in Life' action research project in an accessible format covering key tasks and learnings from this 16-month project.

We will outline:

- Our methodology (Action Research)
- What we did in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Workshops in the working ecology)
- My Working World (Empathy Guided Partnership across the network)
- Barriers & Enablers (The learnings and practice stories of change)
- Recommendations (Strengthening whānau-led practice across the disability sector)
- Emergent evidence of sustainability

This is a **summary** of the A Good Start in Life Action Research Project Report.
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BACK GROUND

A Good Start in Life context

Government wants to partner with parents, whānau, service providers and professionals to realise an effective support system for whānau parenting young children with disabilities.

To this end, the Ministry of Education is leading a collaborative, cross-government project called A Good Start in Life. A Good Start in Life aims to develop policy options to improve government supports for parents, family and whānau with disabled children aged 0-8 years. This project is one of three commissioned under action 4b of the Disability Action Plan.

From here in we use whānau to include parents, families and caregivers.

Why we need to do things differently

Children with disabilities are more likely to have complex and/or multiple needs at different points in their lives than other children.

Consequently, whānau interact with many different practitioners and services, across sectors - often simultaneously.

Whānau with young disabled children report ineffective and fragmented help across services and across sectors. Experiences like Pip's (Box 1) are commonplace.

“It was like being a CEO of a big company, not really knowing what everyone does but hoping it's alright. It was a full time job co-ordinating all the appointments and making sure we were home or in the right place....sometimes I would pretend I knew who they were, it was awful, they were all really nice...but I never really knew if it was all any good for Jack.”

Pip, PARENT

Box 1: Extract from vignette of a parents' experience

Whānau often experience professionals as more oriented to their own expertise than to the needs, aspirations, strengths, difficulties and expertise of their own whānau.

For whānau, this can amount to conflicting or unattuned advice. Whānau also report they experience the network of services as maze-like – both time-consuming and difficult to navigate. They can feel 'done to' rather than enabled, and gatekeeping from service 'silos' may make professional help feel inaccessible, fragmented, ineffective and at worst it may be harmful.

Why is this the case, when helping professionals want to provide the best possible service?

Problems in the support system through a partnership lens

Siloed services. Within the support system for young children with disabilities, services are diverse. Services are built around expertise about particular aspects of human life and are underpinned by corresponding bodies of knowledge, skills and expertise. Services are accountable for their own performance results, which may or may not be shared by other services.

No shared professional language. Language is not shared across the support network. Even when terminology is the same, meanings change from one person to the next, within teams and from one service to the next. Conversely, teams and services throughout the network may share some of the same principles, but call them different names.

No shared understanding of partnership. There appears to be no clear and shared understanding between practitioners about the multi-dimensional nature of partnership. By partnership we mean the dynamic interplay between making sense of a situation (construing), and using empathy to guide the practitioner around the roles needed for the family and for other actors within the network. Roles vary moment to moment according to the purpose of an interaction: for example being supportive, influential or facilitative³.

Isolated good practice. Where good practice is identified, it is often located with individual practitioners and is lost if there is a change in individual circumstances. There is little or no systematic attention to developing communities of practice within and between services which draw on the best of evidence based practice, which when it is connected to locally grown expertise, enables sustainable and effective services

A dis-integrated support system. Given the challenges in the support system, it is not surprising that effective communication and purposeful partnerships with families/whānau, within services and between services is difficult to achieve. Some authors suggest that the support system in its natural resting state, and by design, is essentially dis-integrated⁴.

Project Hypothesis

The Project Team proposed that practitioners who have a shared relational framework for building partnerships with whānau, within their teams and across the network, will be better prepared to consistently offer whānau-led services.

How partnering will help

Within the literature, it is well established that the quality of the relationship between the practitioner and a client is a critical factor in a positive outcome for the client⁵. For example,

One systematic review⁶ identified the therapeutic relationship as the 'most important predictive factor of nursing interventions' across 160 studies.

Effective relationships allow technical expertise to be expressed and embraced by whānau.

Equally, effective relationships within teams, or organisations, and between organisations in the wider support network, facilitate the flow of information and expertise.

Evidence suggests that if practitioners have a shared framework for building partnerships

with whānau⁷, and across their teams and the networks⁸, more effective and sustainable parent-directed help will result. Positive outcomes result where the notion of partnership and the importance of the whānau contribution to the work is understood, explicitly acknowledged, valued and facilitated throughout the support network.

It is not sufficient to implement the framework solely within the practitioner's direct clinical work with the whānau. The partnership framework needs to be integrated across the 'working world' of the practitioner. This provides multiple opportunities to have a 'felt experience' of partnership that is congruent, and to notice and learn from peers and colleagues. It reduces time needed to understand the hundreds of different constructs about the work, the whānau, the services and the team. The practitioner feels well supported and connected to the various components of their working world and can therefore take a dynamic approach to each whānau.

Effective relationships are partnerships

A partnership relationship has several key characteristics that increase effectiveness in engaging with others and achieving positive outcomes⁹. Within a service context, partnership relationships give both the practitioner and the whānau the opportunity to

“ I would still like to work on not being Mrs Fixit and not have all the answers. It's still something I struggle with because I value what people think of me in terms of my intelligence...I would like people to think I know what I'm talking about and that I'm smart. It's not very helpful though, I asked a mother recently what she wanted to happen and she told me what she wanted to happen and how and it wasn't anything like what I had prepared, I was a bit shocked at myself...I think I'll be working on that one all my life. (P20)

discuss and mutually agree aims and purpose. Partnership relationships also help to identify, negotiate and explicitly resolve differences and conflicts.

The shared processes at the heart of partnership relationships allow the complimentary roles, expertise and knowledge of the whānau and the practitioner to be acknowledged and used to fully contribute to achieving the goals of the whānau.

Partnering requires the practitioner and whānau to recognize and accept their shared rights and responsibilities within the relationship, as well as agree how they will work together in a coordinated and mutually acceptable way. For practitioners to develop partnership relationships, it may involve a fundamental shift in construct. Moving from an 'expert' position, that is leading with professional and technical knowledge and skill, to a 'partnering' position – that is starting with the whānau and developing a balance between the expertise of the whānau and the professional expertise. We would describe this as a paradigm shift in most effective relationship, from 'expert' to 'partnership'.

My Working World: Empathy Guided Partnership across the Network

We used the My Working World (MWW) Framework to understand enablers and barriers to whānau-led practice. MWW offers a suite of concepts and tools to explore and understand partnership working through a systems lens.



My Working World is a framework for building partnerships with whānau, in teams and across the network. It's an integrated approach that respects service and practitioner differences to promote and sustain effective whānau-led help. It's not a single approach for a group of clearly defined services or professionals, it's the opposite. It is a framework for building effective partnerships no matter what the work or purpose at hand. Central to the My Working World is the ecological lens through which the practitioner is viewed (Fig 2). It is a lens that sees them as having a working world that can both enable and inhibit their ability to work in partnership. They are part of a professional group, a team, an organisation and a wider community.

My Working World is designed to...

- ... support professionals to develop a clear and shared framework to build and sustain relationships underpinned by partnership principles and guided by empathy
- ... combine the best of local partnering practices with the evidence-base in a way that fits for the practitioner, team and service context
- ... support the practitioner, managers, and teams to understand what works, what doesn't and why?
- ... help practitioners', managers and teams' to partner with each other and partner with others in the network
- ... help explore and expand practice in the practitioners working ecology ('My Working World'), where collective action brings about practice change
- ... encourage the creation of Communities of Living Practices that hold an equal respect for local practice and evidence (fidelity x sustainability)

Fig 1 illustrates the MWW approach to partnership. The Partnership Compass captures three important aspects of the partnership relationship: empathy, sense-making and roles.

Essentially using sense-making and empathy to read a situation, practitioners can 'dial up and dial down' their knowledge, expertise and experience to take up the roles of partnership.

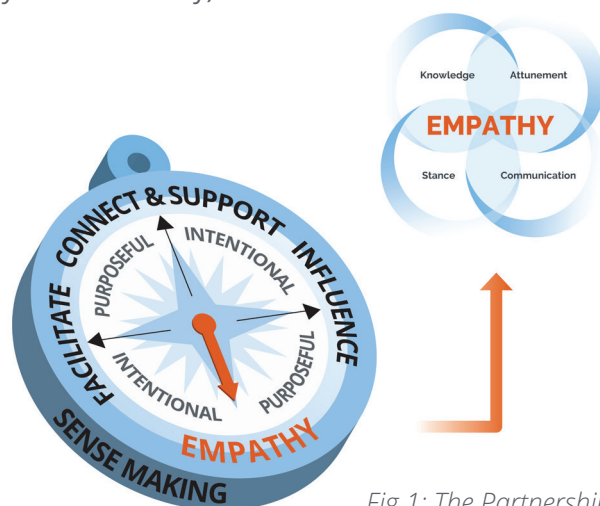


Fig 1: The Partnership Compass

Partnership Roles, shown in black on the face of the compass, are about being mindful of what practitioners are trying to achieve moment by moment in the relationship with whānau. For example, a situation where practitioners are trying to demonstrate support for, or connect with, a family, are different from situations where they are trying to influence change or offer technical expertise.

In reality, practitioners need to constantly move between roles given the demands of a situation - guided by empathy - and purpose of the relationship to partner successfully. Working this way requires great commitment from the practitioner because there is a constant call on the practitioner to consciously demonstrate a range of qualities and skills that facilitate this process, in MWW we activate these using empathy. Partnership relationships do not develop automatically.

Empathy is a process, where there is an interplay and dynamic relationship between having an empathic stance, learning about and understanding the use of empathy, attuning to yourself and others, and the ability to communicate using the practitioner's

personal and professional qualities and skills¹⁵. In the Partnership compass, empathy is identified as the 'True North' of practice. Empathy is the place from which you navigate and orientate your practice. Activating the combination of qualities and skills dynamically with each whānau, peer, manager or colleague in the team and across the system.

Sense-making is a core concept underpinning the Partnership Compass and one that connects intimately with every aspect of the My Working World Framework. It draws on Personal Construct theory¹⁶. This theory helps explain how practitioners make sense of themselves, whānau, the teams they work in and the network they navigate: how they see and adapt to their world psychologically and socially. Reflecting, understanding and making meaning as they go enables practitioners to be responsive and flexible, while mobilizing expertise in whānau, expertise in themselves, their team, their service and across the network.

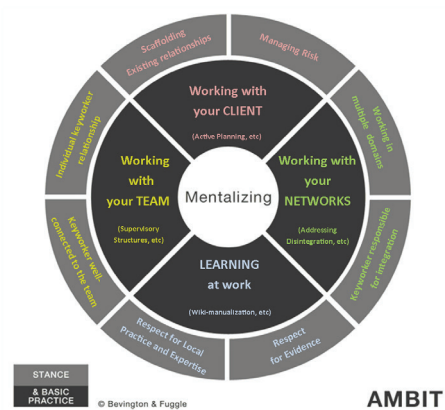
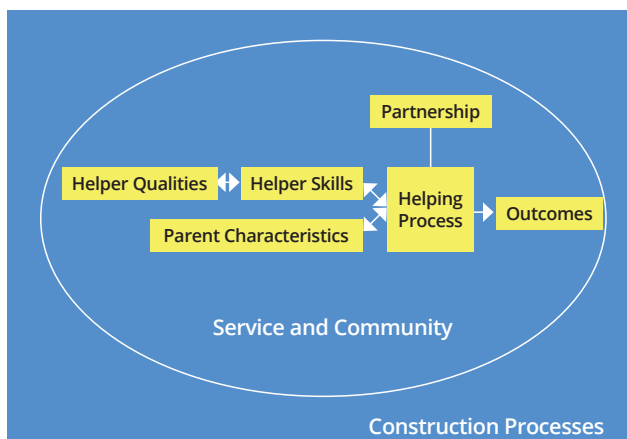
Why 'My Working World'?

The 'My Working World' (MWW)¹ framework has drawn on two evidence based theories; the Family Partnership Model (FPM)² and Adolescent Mentalization-Based Integrative Therapy (AMBIT)³. Drawing further on internationally recognised work, the MWW framework is underpinned by the process of empathy⁴.

The FPM has been successfully adapted and informed population specific interventions for example Helping Families Programme⁵, and Antenatal Postnatal Guidance System. AMBIT is a platform determined to enable effective help for people in complex and fragmented networks. The core practices and principles that enable collaborative, connected and sustainable whānau-directed help are both strongly represented in these two models.

The FPM is focused on the nature of the relationship, the qualities, skills and constructs desirable in a practitioner to provide effective help. The AMBIT has strengths in identifying the points of contact in a network or the inter-relationship between core components of the practitioners Working World (whānau, their team, the network).

Family Partnership Model (Davis & Day 2004)



What it Takes is strongly committed to understanding how the evidence base gets adapted to fit with local best practices to identify enabling factors and conditions for best whānau-led practice in Aotearoa.

HOW

Methodology: Action research across the cohorts

A growing body of evidence suggests action research processes can transform people and organisations, through emergent forms of action-reflection. Action research encourages participants to be in control¹⁷. This orientation parallels a theory of change that suggests the balance between control, or self-agency, and connection is essential in establishing a partnership¹⁸.



We embarked on **A Good Start in Life** as a process of meaning-making about the enablers and barriers to whānau-led practice through a systems lens: a question to actively explore, rather than a set of tasks to deliver.

Action research combines three key activities: research, education, and action. These activities are balanced between the researcher/s and the participants in action research projects. Maguire¹⁹ says:

...participatory researchers caution against either dichotomy: "They know, I don't know" or "They don't know, I know". Instead participatory research offers a partnership: "We both know some things; neither of us knows everything. Working together we will know more, and we will both learn more about how to know".

With this assertion in mind, we started with the assumption that all parties had knowledge and experience to contribute. We wanted to help participants bridge the gap between practice based evidence (good and effective practice at the coal face) and evidence based practice by exploring their current partnering practices.

We aimed to share knowledge - cognitive, affective and behavioural/ skills - and integrate it through a reflective and analytic lens on practice, within a systems framework - **My Working World**.

The development of a partnership can be challenged or supported by a number of factors. Some of these are intrinsic to the practitioner. Others stem from how the team relates with the practitioner. Further out in the practitioner's ecology, the requirements, expectations and culture of an organisation can also effect the nature of the relationship developed.

We focused on both the intrapersonal level and inter-personal levels (with whānau, in teams, and across organisations and networks). We aimed to highlight differences and commonalities in constructs about partnership, and compare and contrast them to the theory and knowledge underpinning My Working World, from the evidence base.

'My Working World' Action Research Project Key Aims:

- Explore, acknowledge, enhance and extend practices, processes and principles inherent and explicit in current practice across a range of teams and disciplines.
- Actively connect up different services, types of teams who are broadly speaking working with similar types of families i.e. accessing disability services to share best practice and 'street level' innovations on a platform of 'evidence based' practice.
- Identify key enablers and barriers to partnership working.

Data collection across the cohorts

We used several tools to help us gather information about participant's practices, before during and after their training. Results of these assessments fed back into our facilitation and our planning for subsequent cohorts. We found some tools yielded little value or were confusing for participants and these were modified for re-use or dropped.

Assessment Tool	Cohort One	Cohort Two	Cohort Three
Case Study participants asked to provide a practice case study. Case studies graded using a rating scale across several dimensions of helping relationship, eg no evidence of relationship evidence some evidence, therapeutic relationship described. (CBT coding system analysed and scored)	Once at start, and once pre-programme (differential between T1 and T2 indicates theoretical implementation and articulation of partnership working)	Once at start	-
Team Audit asking what tools team used in practice. Meant to indicate Partnership support tools uptake in teams and in network. (tried in different formats – but people didn't know the concepts so didn't answer)	Pre-prog and post-prog	Pre-prog	Pre-prog
Implementation questionnaire (keep, change, discard)- individual practitioner uptake of partnering practices	End of workshop series, then again near end of practice integration. Then survey monkey 5 months after 22/31 responses	End of practice integration session	End of first practice integration session – but modified as user insight. What they used was elicited through conversations with groups, individuals, and face-to-face, and via phone and email.

Assessment Tool	Cohort One	Cohort Two	Cohort Three
<p>Partnership barriers and enablers questionnaire – practitioners and managers identified barriers and enablers to partnership working (in practitioners, with families, with the team and across the network) at the end of programme sessions. Thematically coded and member checked by Cohort 1 and 2 participants and researchers in final integration session. Thematic analysis. (coded on post it notes, divided into four parts of working world, participants clustered them.)</p> <p>A co-facilitator themed these using: Partnership works best when... Partnership doesn't work when... These were then further distilled and collapsed with all other enablers and barriers that had emerged in other data collection methods</p>	Multiple times at the end of practice integration sessions	Multiple times at the end of practice integration sessions	Results of cohort 1 and 2 shared with managers in cohort 3
<p>Stories of Significant Change (20-40 minute semi-structured interviews) – practitioners interviewed about significant outcomes for families, coding grid to be finessed, stories coded in relation to knowledge and practice change with significant positive outcome identified in families/whānau.</p>	11 post programme	8 (6 during and 2 post programme)	1 plus a number of examples sent through via email of phone Emerging stories of changes in partnering practices – these have been collected one in the practice integration sessions and through correspondence (email/ phone) with the practitioners, practice leads and managers
<p>Journaling – all researchers involved have journaled after each contact with participants (in Cohort 1 and 2-) this highlights themes to provide a 'fair account' of enablers and barriers as they have arisen in the course of the installation of My Working World</p>	After every participant session	After every participant session	After every participant session

WHAT

Three cohorts

We worked with three different cohorts of people within the disability support eco-system to test how best to implement our partnership approach.

Our work with the three cohorts was staggered across time, so learnings from the first cohort could be used with the second cohort, and learnings from the first and second cohorts could be implemented with the third cohort.

We intended that each cohort include different organisations with people from across the organisational hierarchy: managers, practice leads and practitioners. This was a deliberate strategy to spread the partnering approach across the different levels of the disability support eco-system and across the sector. In Cohort two, only one organisation attended the training. However, we combined some practice integration sessions for cohort one and two to achieve cross-sector partnering.

Broadly speaking, the training for each cohort comprised two blocks: a theory block run in workshops, and a practice integration block, run as sessions where participants brought their own experiences to work with.

“ I hadn’t realised ... on the first session I thought ‘I’m already doing this stuff’. Second session I said, ‘I didn’t really want to come to this because I figured I was already doing it, but after the first session I thought Holy Moly, there is a hell of a lot more than I can even begin to think about’. So I laughed and said I was glad to be on board. (P19)

Workshops and practice integration ran across several sessions with the project facilitators. Both used modelling, sharing, coaching and reflection on practice, and on new learning, as learning mechanisms. Our teaching model was explore, demonstrate, imitate and practice (EDIP)²⁰. Participants were regularly asked for feedback on the sessions so tools and processes could be modified and iterated to meet their needs and attune to their practice development continuum.

The practice integration sessions were designed to reflect on practice and what had been ‘tried out’ with whānau, in their teams, and across the network. They provided a space for reflection, noticing any adaptations, and getting curious about what had been taken up, adapted and dropped.

The following section provides an overview of each cohort, then describes how specific tools to support partnership practice across the practitioner’s ecology/ working world were taken up, adapted or dropped by each cohort.

Workshops were designed to facilitate an understanding of the My Working World framework in the context of the participants' working ecology

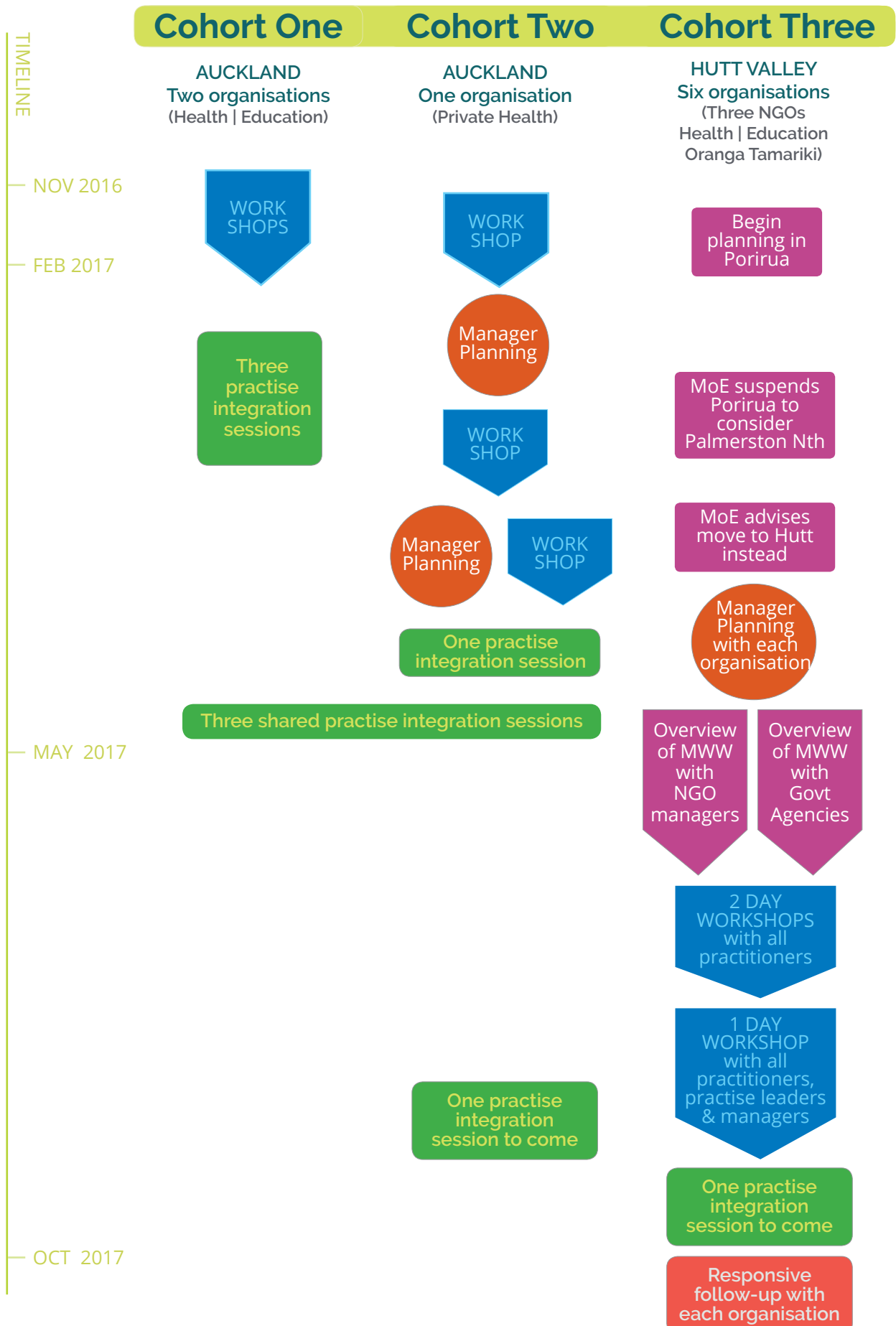
Each workshop:

- used socratic seminars and participatory exercises to increase reflection through meta-analysis
- practiced and demonstrated the core qualities and skills using the partnership compass
- explored the theory of partnership in relation to practice
- supported the group to develop partnerships with us and each other as a parallel process

During workshops and practice integration, practitioners were given different types of resources to increase their knowledge, and develop tools to implement practice change. We collected data about current partnership practices, analysed and integrated this, maintaining a constant cycle of research & reflection; analysis & education; action and practice integration.

“...you have just partnershiped us haven't you? You were empathic and I felt like you really listened to what I had to say, and then you facilitated us to do that exercise and influenced what lens you wanted us to look at it through.” (P27)

“ I'm explicit now about the purpose of the assessment so that it can be a shared thing and be really meaningful for the parents and child. That's a huge shift for me in my constructs about what my job is and how to do it. Explicit explicit explicit.” (P6)



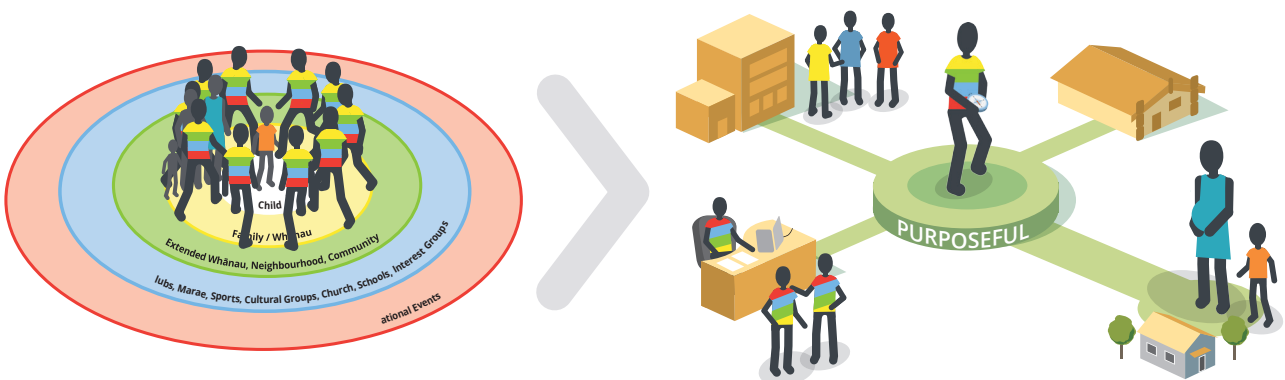
Using My Working World in Action Research



My Working World takes an ecological perspective of the practitioner, viewing them as an individual located in a highly inter-related system. Each practitioner has a 'sphere of influence' or ambit, and what occurs here can both enable and inhibit effectiveness in the work with children and families/ whānau.

- Uses facilitation methods that model partnership and provide opportunities to develop a shared understanding of concepts and how they relate to practice
- Uses facilitation methods that coach people – that is notice when they are using partnering techniques and encouraging those practices
- Provides opportunities to practice relationship skills at work and then come back and reflect on what worked and what was challenging
- Creates opportunities within learning sessions for participants to 'experience' partnering – making it more than a theoretical exercise.
- Provides tools that are well-designed and appealing for people.

My Working World enables a Lens Change to create a more coordinated approach



Tools that support Partnership

Relationship Facilitator cards

How the relationship is developed and sustained fundamentally affects how technical expertise is used or taken up, equally the way in which the technical expertise is delivered will deepen and strengthen the relationship with whānau. Using the principles of partnership to explicitly review the relationship is essential.

“We are going to use the reviewing the relationship cards to develop protocols for liaison officer in schools. We need to address the inconsistency across the liaison role in schools. Help hone the process. ‘How does the teacher want to work with me’. Find out more about the teacher. ‘I’m starting with you (teacher)’ It will be a useful check in. We have sent templates to schools and they have responded and added.” (P61 & 64)



Thinking Caps cards

Thinking Caps offers a process with a set of steps to facilitate a conversation in partnership with a colleague who needs help – clinical, teaming, networking.

It's designed to create empathy, reduce distress and activate thinking between teammates by providing a structured process for partnering. It requires the potential helper to negotiate and agree the purpose and timing of the conversation for the colleague asking for help, and manage the process.

“I think I have been able to activate empathy with the families and clients but I don't think I have done this with my colleagues, I've been doing this much more and it has really extended how I can tap into my team for support.” (P9)



“ The Thinking Caps in a group changed so much for me, I was able to go on to co-ordinate a transfer up country much better. There were all sorts of risks with the family and I was quite stuck and worried; it was just so complex with so many people involved. In the past, I would have just sent a transfer letter and worried about what was happening with the family, they really would have fallen through the net I think. I probably wouldn't have talked to that many people, I would have felt embarrassed, but I was able to just sit and realise that I was really worried, you know with the empathy bit and then all the suggestions I could just work out what I could do next from what everyone was saying. I mean that was like speed consulting with 16 people it was so good, one of the best (what I would call) supervision sessions ever.” (P12)

Net-‘works’ Grid

Net-‘works’ grids offers a framework to enable partnership practices across the practitioners working ecology, encouraging and extending empathy to different parts of the network and enabling the ‘Net to Work’.

“Wow, we have been completely focussing on the wrong things with this case, it's like we were trying to get (named professional from another agency) to completely change their constructs, we were actually going to escalate this and we know his manager feels the same way, what a waste of time and energy. I feel a little bit guilty that we lost sight of the child and what our role is. We need to do this for lots of cases because we are often in conflict with other agencies. We need to get empathy going between us, all across the team, instead of bagging them. (P51)

Net-works Grid - map the key connecting conversations



LEVELS OF DISINTEGRATION	Baby/Child	Parent/Primary Caregiver	Extended whanau	Other agency (actual person)	Other agency (actual person)	Other agency (actual person)
Explanation What's the problem/construct / sense-making? (Why is it happening?)						
Intervention What to do? (...that might help...)						
Responsibility Who does what? (Who's responsible for doing this?)						

LEARNED

What are the barriers and enablers in partnering?

This section pulls together the themes about enablers and barriers to partnership working developed with Cohorts One and Two and all other data collated.

Methodology

Throughout the later workshops and practice integration sessions with Cohorts One and Two, we asked participants to reflect on partnering. Table 2 below shows our prompt questions. They ask about enablers and barriers to partnering with family, within teams and across the network.

Participant responses were transferred to post-it notes in single data bites (in excess of 300). On the last day of the shared practice integration session between Cohort One and Two, the participants themed the post-its.

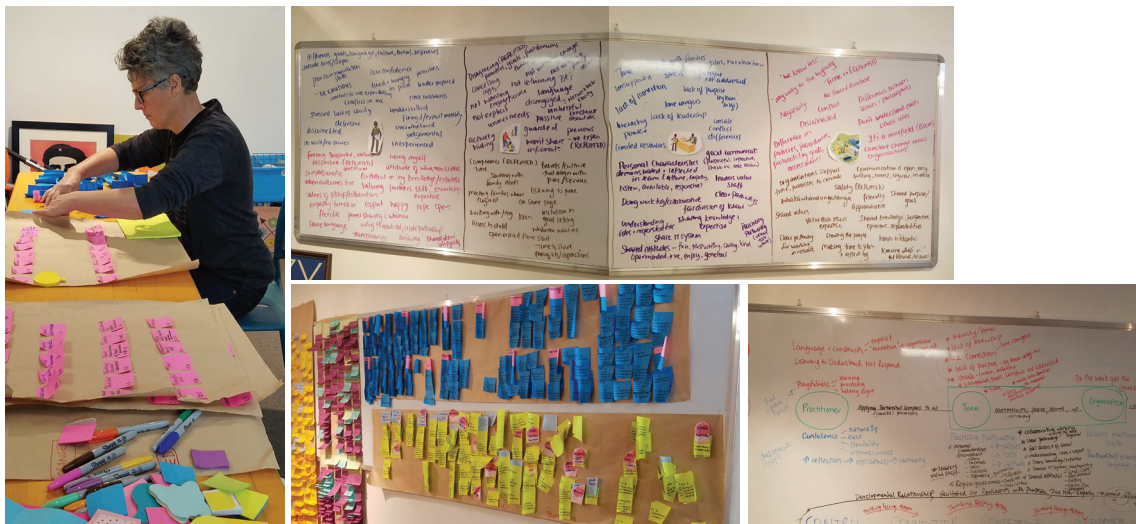
The themes were then distilled further by a facilitator/ researcher in the programme. From that distillation emerged a number of themes common to partnering or not.

We have provided some quotes from stories of significant change and conversations with and between participants during the training. Conversations with and between participants were recorded by trainers during workshop and practice integration sessions.

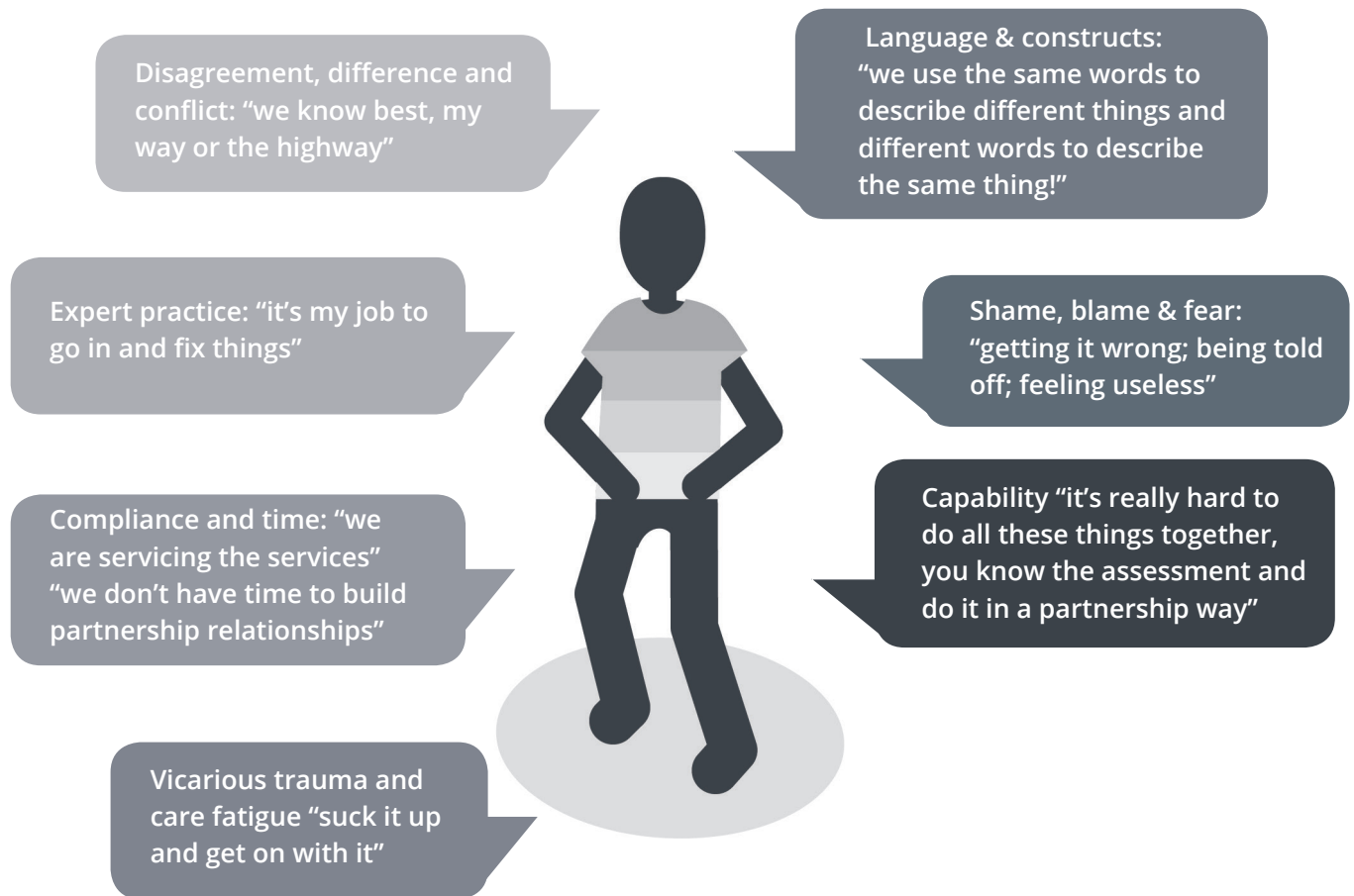
We discuss the barriers and enablers next.

<p>Q1: What HELPS you work with a partnership approach, as a practitioner? with families/whanau? with your team? across the network?</p>	<p>Q2: What makes it DIFFICULT for you to work with a partnership approach, as a practitioner? with families/whanau? with your team? across the network?</p>
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Table 2: Partnering barriers and enablers prompt questions



Barriers to partnership working



Disagreement, difference & conflict: "we know best" "it's my way or the highway"

Partnering in conditions of difference, disagreement or conflict with others are barriers to partnering, practitioners described it as being hard to impossible. This was a very strong theme across the working world of the practitioner.

Where there is disagreement, difference or conflict, practitioners don't construe a partnering approach as being enabling. Rather, they coped by: **withdrawing, just get on with my job with the child.**

“ Kiwi's don't like to have difficult conversations-we are asked to have courageous conversations with families, I don't think we do and we don't have them with our colleagues or in the network” (P64)

Practitioners described feeling **conflicted about goals, their purpose or reason for working with families, their perspectives, and feeling defensive in the face of difference.**

Within this theme, conflict and difference was linked to practitioners judgements about the family or how they felt the whānau perceived them.

Several practitioners across all three cohorts described feeling judgemental about whānau and how they were living. For example:

“ I feel really conflicted. I think how they live is wrong and they don't care about their son. I'm not going to build a relationship with them. I'll do what I can for the boy, that's who I feel sorry for! (P34)

Some practitioners thought they couldn't work with whānau who didn't want to work with them.

“ I think you can be in partnership with someone that wants to be in partnership with you but if they don't well that's that. (P30)

Practitioners described families who didn't agree with the priorities, goals, problems and concerns that the practitioner identify as being hard to work in partnership with.

There were significant barriers attributed to the families, who were described as being **unwilling, avoidant and non-compliant, guarded, disconnected and actively hiding information.**

Practitioners used the term 'unsafe' multiple times to describe barriers to partnering with their **teams**. For example, it being **unsafe because there was conflict and that lone rangers doing their own thing made it hard- if we don't agree they just do what they want anyway and the stronger voice wins in our team.**

In the **network**, barriers to partnering were linked to culture and operational differences. For example, practitioners described attitudes of “my way or the highway”, or “we know best”. Operationally, barriers to partnering were linked to differences in databases, and differences in policies, procedures and protocols (like goal setting, assessment processes). Practitioners used phrases like “we don't understand each other's roles”, differences in values and philosophies”, “conflict between practitioners and services – rudeness” “differences in roles in the same professionals” “it's a minefield.”

Perceptions of conflict and difference served to isolate and silo practitioners and services – ultimately creating the kind of fragmented service system experienced by whānau with kids with disabilities.

Breaking the silos – an example from a workshop

Practitioners identified difference, disagreement and conflict as significant barriers across their working world to working in partnership. This was brought into focus when we asked workshop participants to set out a network (live net-'works' grid) around a whānau.

The practitioners involved were struck by how many people were involved with the whānau (all 27 participants took up roles and empty chairs were used for additional people). There

were significant differences between professionals about what the priorities were and unsurprisingly the mum was refusing to allow anyone to visit. Practitioners originally tried to work out how to 'get in' to the family. But with empathic enquiry in 'surplus reality'²⁹, were able to think about how they might work in the system with difference. For example, befriending support people in the whānau's network to check in on them, and partnering with other services, rather than going in themselves. Service providers in the network (and the whānau) agreed to set limits for contact time with the whānau to once a week. Service providers then negotiated among themselves about who would turn up in the weekly slot and how best to help.

This exercise was profound for the practitioners involved, because they developed a concrete picture of how difference and conflict abounded. And with no partnership working evident, how overwhelming and unhelpful it was for the whānau and the child.

We noticed some practitioners shifted away from the difference | disagreement | conflict theme as the workshops progressed. In these cases, practitioners were able to make use of some of the tools that enabled conversations with whānau, in their teams and across the network as was reflected in their stories.

Expert practice: "It's my job to go in and fix things"

Participants gave high value to being 'right' and being 'expert'. Holding a balance between having technical expertise, and valuing time for empathy, to match the technical expertise and what whānau's needs, was tenuous.

Some practitioners thought that whānau's expectations of practitioners being 'the experts' would get in the way of a partnering approach.

“ Families don't want us to work in partnership, they want us to be professional and bring our expertise, it's what I was trained to do, it's not equal. (P27)

However, when practitioners were partnering, they noticed the difference in themselves and the responses of their relationship partners. Partnering meant they were following and adding to their relationship with whānau, peer or colleague, rather than holding a strong position that included leading the process and critiquing the partner.

“ I have turned our pathway into a map that I can then share with the family and get them to alter and change it. It's been amazing because they then say what they want and when, and I am held to account for my part. I really recognise that my own constructs were about always having the 'answer'. As soon as some started talking I would be thinking about what solutions I could offer, I realised I wasn't listening at all and it was sooo exhausting. I really felt like I had to be the poster girl of education and my profession and get it all right even before I knew what was needed. Really impossible but I thought that was what I had to do. Now I stop and listen and empathise and reflect on where I need to be heading partnership wise.... it's still hard but it's also much better and much more empowering for the families. (P20)

Creating an ‘expert’ relationship was often initiated in the first session with a family. This was highlighted and emerged as a theme from the practitioner’s written descriptions of what enables partnership with whānau...

Enablers were described as when whānau were:

compliant (repeated in several places), they listen to practitioner, are on the same page, work with us, are included in goal setting, beliefs and culture are aligned with practitioner and service, value us, want me.

These enablers identified by the practitioners do not align with theory about what enables partnering, there is a clear theory practice gap in the way that partnership is understood. Interestingly there was a lone voice who described meeting the ‘families where they are at’ and ‘making time to share aspirations and hopes’. These lone observations are aligned with the theory of partnership underpinning My Working World.

Barriers were described as when whānau:

Disagree with priorities, goals, concerns, problems, when they don’t want to change, not wanting to engage or disengaged, are passive, guarded and wont share, having unhelpful constructs about disability, have previous negative experiences of services and have unmet needs.

This practice contrasts with partnership working described below by a practitioner following participating in My Working World:

“ When I work in partnership, I really try and create a plan with a family. I always used to go in with a pre-determined plan, when I started this My Working World, I had a family completely reject me and my plan, so I’ve been on a real journey thinking about how I can slow down and listen to the family rather than coming up with solutions before really understanding what the problems were. This has been a huge relief for me, I don’t have to be paddling the waka by myself it’s my job to get us all into the waka and then try and get us all paddling it together...such a relief to get that I’m not solely responsible for getting good outcomes for the family. (P19)

The changes observed in practitioner’s constructs from an ‘expert’ ‘know best’ and ‘do to’ to practices that actively facilitate whānau into the driver’s seat of their journey with the service has been breath taking.

Compliance and time: “we are servicing the services” “we don’t have time to build partnership relationships”

Organisational targets and expectations narrow the practitioner’s approach to a whānau. For example, practitioners prioritise the needs of their organisation rather than making time to listen to whānau.

“ I know what I have to do and its my targets that are checked, sometimes its really frustrating because I think the family really want something else (P10)

Attending and listening in turn produces information that helps identify needs, the following is an example of a practitioner describing having to deliberately do this, that is meet the whānau where they are at and proceed from there rather than be driven by the outcome required for her organisation.

“ The other day I just put my pen down and listened to them for 50 mins...it wasn’t about what I wanted to know and needed for the assessment but I knew I just had to do that first. I’m more explicit and have built in what does bother them on a day to day basis, particularly around the burden of care. Previously I would see it but not necessarily acknowledge it as I was so focussed on getting what I needed for the report. (P31)

Organisational targets and expectations can narrow the scope of responses considered for a family. For example, if direct contact with a child is attached to payment or a KPI, then assessing what needs to happen across a network can be overlooked. A practitioner will do what they have to do, rather than explore what’s needed and when, and then co-ordinate that with the whānau and then across the network,

“ Sometimes I don’t think the referral to me is based on what the family need or want particularly. Its just that they need so much, so a whole lot of referrals are done and I do what I’m supposed to do because they might not get another chance. I suppose I also worry that if I refer them out of our service, we lose that piece of work...or actually I don’t even think about who might be best across the whole network, wow that sounds really bad doesn’t it? I think I do still do some good... well I’d like to think so (P10)

Language and constructs: “we use the same words to describe different things and different words to describe the same thing!”

Without a shared understanding, practitioners and teams become insular, isolated and defensive. Warmth, empathy and curiosity about how the sum of the parts might work together better gets lost.

Having very different and/or unexpressed constructs (or assumptions) about what other professionals do in the network, and what should be prioritised, can hamper partnering. Similarly, using language in documentation that is counter to being whānau-led, or misunderstanding between agencies, professionals and in teams, prevents working together for whānau. Everybody has their own understanding, depending on their personal and professional backgrounds, organisation, culture etc.

Within a network, practitioners may have different understandings of what partnership and empathy mean and how they relate to the tasks involved in their roles.

The following quotes give examples of what happens when positive constructs of partnering are shared and used.

“ I have been going into professional’s meetings for a long time and when there are other professionals that have done the My Working World it feels really different. I feel like it’s the first time I’ve actually been listened to and understood. It’s been ok to freely share our worries and move forward from there and previously there was just no trust. (P17)

“ Holding a position of humility and co-ordination, finding out what others in the family network and professional network are offering and doing and being explicit with families about what might be helpful when. Rather than just going in and doing ‘my thing’. (P15)

“ Being explicit and asking open ended questions helps to navigate a smoother journey with the family, not just assuming I know what’s going on, really explicitly checking that we are on the same page. (P36)

**Shame, blame & fear:
“getting it wrong; being told off; feeling useless”**

Most of the practitioners we worked with expressed an enormous commitment to the children and whānau they were working with, but often operated from a paradigm of fear. They could not afford to get practice wrong, for fear of getting ‘told off, or ‘feeling inadequate and useless’.

“ I check in once a month with my manager, but I feel like it's a bit of a check to make sure I'm doing my job properly. I don't feel like I could say how upset I've felt. Sometimes this work is just heartbreaking. (P25)

This barrier became evident in our training sessions where we introduced the idea of reflection practice sheets (RPS). In the face of powerlessness often expressed by whānau and throughout the system, the RPS is a tool that encourages an openness, curiosity and creative lens to practice. This was met with large amounts of fear;

In a paradigm of fear, practice becomes a black box – only prised open in the event of disaster. This leads to a deadening of learning. Throughout the workshops and practice integration sessions across all three cohorts, we often observed participants

“ I won't be writing down what I really think, who might read it and what would happen to me if they did?" *(multiple participants expressed this sentiment, including several from Cohort 3).*

communicating shame to other participants who did not show immediate proficiency with a new practice. Participants were 'listening to respond' rather than 'listening to understand.'

Listening and responding rather than listening to understand is a barrier to listening and therefore facilitating partnerships.

'Making' people work in partnership fits here. Poor partnership practices can be tracked

“ The Thinking Caps Frame really helps me to listen properly, in a way that sort of guides me with how to listen and navigate the conversation, not just with my colleagues but with whānau as well. I just need to practice as I am such a fixer and often there is just nothing to fix, but lots of grief about all sorts of things that I just need to listen and be present with. I think this helps families, but it's hard to value that because our jobs are to be expert in our roles and we are paid to 'do' things. I've really had to challenge my own constructs about that. It's hard. (P20)

back through and up the system. We had multiple experiences as facilitators of group participants and reference and project group members, indicating that because it was policy, process or an expectation, a practitioner should just be told to do things in partnership because that was what was desired. This highlighted a barrier to partnership that spanned the system, that is that if you repeatedly have experiences of not being partnered with it is very difficult to model something different, especially if the modelling is within a relationship where power is not addressed. The old adage of 'do what I say not what I do' has no enabling potential it is in fact a strong reinforcer of not working in a partnership paradigm.

Vicarious trauma and care fatigue: “suck it up and get on with it”

The theme of vicarious trauma and care overlaps somewhat with Shame and Blame. There is a sense from practitioners that they need to ‘suck it up’ and ‘do the job’. We noted an inconsistent level of clinical supervision; supervision that attends not only to the formative and normative functions of the practitioners, but also the restorative function.

The following quotes demonstrate how tools from MWW help practitioners empathise with grief and sadness AND activate thinking, rather than become overwhelmed with it.

“ What’s been interesting is that when my team mate or my manager uses thinking caps and does the empathy with me it feels very empowering. I find myself thinking my way through problems rather than feeling overwhelmed and a bit useless. It really does work to get me out of the pool. I’m not criticising anyone, but now when someone tries to pull the nail out of my head or discounts how I’m feeling by either telling me I’m not ineffective it feels really undermining. The terrible thing is I think I do this to parents as well. I feel like I changed on the inside and really think empathy is really powerful and I would have said I was empathic before. (P12)

“ There are so many levels of grief, sometimes it feels like I just need to offload cause what I’m hearing and seeing every day is really hard. It’s exhausting. I think using thinking caps to contain this is really good. I get properly listened to and then I can just get on with the next appointment. (P13)

“ I often have staff come into my office and they are feeling really stressed out and overwhelmed. (Talking about using thinking caps with a practitioner who was very emotionally aroused.) We had two outcomes that she was happy with and it was enough to take the pressure off, so she could get through the rest of the day, I felt like I had managed to help her in a way that contained her and didn’t overwhelm me. (P33)

“ Working in partnership with each other has been a revelation, I think I listen better and I think I’m listened to better. It feels like it reduces my stress quite a lot, I used to wake up in the night, I still do, but I’m more likely to think I’ll just use the compass tomorrow and it will work out. (P52)

Capability: “it’s really hard to do all these things together, you know the assessment, the goals, the plan and do it in a partnership way”

Partnering can be hampered by practitioners knowing about the content of a task, but not having a clear framework for process or how to do it. For example, an assessment is generally construed as something that is completed by a practitioner to a whānau, rather than an assessment document being the output from an exploration facilitated by the practitioner with the whānau.

If growth is construed as learning knowledge and techniques, rather than increasing reflective capacity, applying and adapting clear frameworks and identifying and working with unhelpful constructs, there can be a preoccupation with technical skills. That is doing assessment using the paperwork to drive the process rather than integrating the principles that underpin them.

The following quotes show how tools have been used to facilitate a shared understanding of a situation. In these examples, tools are not used to pigeon-hole but to explore, facilitate and empower partners.

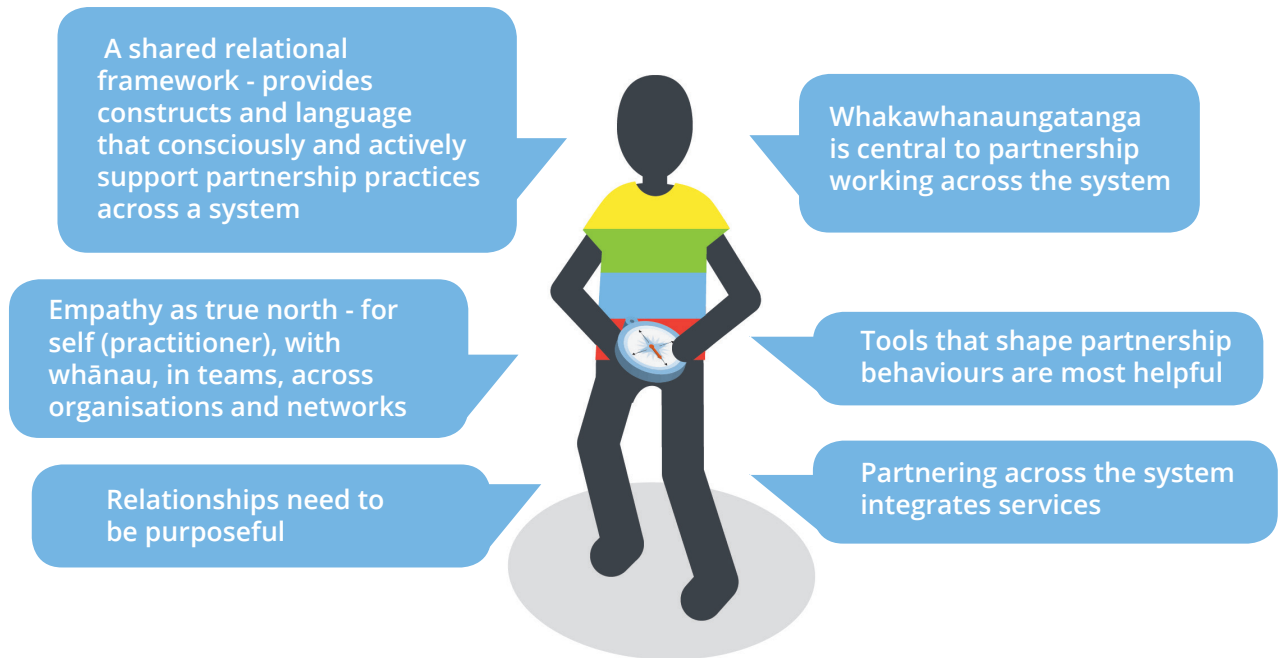
“ I did a network grid with several of my team. It was really hard to see things from others point of view, but I felt much more confident going into the meeting because I understood much more about what was happening with the other professionals. (P7)

“ I do the network grids all the time now. It takes the emotionality out of it. (P37)

“ Being empathic across the system doesn’t mean we all agree, it just means we are trying to understand each other, and can then more easily have conversations about really complex problems and issues that we all might have prioritised and that needs to happen away from the parent. Poor parents trying to decide who of us is most important! (P36)

“ I’ve been using the disintegration grid in the professionals meetings so we really listen to each other and then we are able to get an understanding about where the problems are and how best to address them. It feels like I am doing this work on behalf of the family and that’s right they shouldn’t be doing all the co-ordinating. (P23)

Enablers to Partnership working



A shared relational framework - provides constructs and language that consciously and actively support partnership practices across a system

Sharing values and frameworks enables partnership. Both at the workshops, and since the workshops, participants have reported the benefits of sharing an understanding and using language that is commonly understood as ‘Partnership Compass’ language.

“ We have noticed lots more shared language around partnering and techniques being used to get around issues that arise [most often barriers in the shape of people :)]. (P39)

“ We have the prompts for thinking caps on our desks, so I just grab it when someone wants to talk to me, then they know that I’m going to partner with them and when I say ‘do you want to do a thinking caps?’ they know what I’m talking about. (P13)

“ I just pulled out the disintegration grid (net-‘works’ grid) and briefly explained it and everyone was up for using it and we got a really clear picture of what everyone was doing with the family. There was no elbowing for who’s work was most important and we were able to work through how we should go forward ‘cause there are too many people in the family’s life. (P6)

Empathy as true north - for self (practitioner), with whānau, in teams, across organisations and networks

Empathy is central for self (practitioner), with whānau, in teams, across organisations and networks. Empathy is the place to start. It is the building block for activating the qualities and skills that enable practitioners to dial up and dial down the roles.

Empathy is work. It's not the same as befriending or feeling sorry for someone, and empathy at work is different from natural empathy. It's about trying to put yourself in your partners shoes and being responsive. Does this person want to connect? Do they want something from your technical expertise? Do they need you to broker access to some other resources in the network (not necessarily from you or your organisation)?

“ I think I have been able to activate empathy with the families and clients, but I don't think I have done this with my colleagues. I've been doing this much more now and it has really extended how I can tap into my team for support. (P16)

When empathy is activated, responsivity follows. Being responsive - 'do unto others what they want done unto them'

“ When we met the client I came in with empathy activated. I wanted to understand where she was coming from. I gave her an opportunity to share exactly where she was at, what her concerns were and tried to listen to her frustrations with the system, then we easily moved to what to do next. (P6)

If empathy (for self and another) is not activated and sustained by the practitioner, they are unable to partner with families. A lack of empathy is reinforced in teams, in the network and up and across organisational systems. Participants gave examples contrasting situations where empathy was activated or not activated.

“ I won't gloss over their grief. It's not just grief in relation to what's happened to their child, it's all the other losses - not being able to work as a (..) anymore, not being able to have a meal together as a couple... its heartbreaking...but activating empathy helps me to REALLY listen. And it's like, that's the thing I do...activate empathy...It's strange as I always thought I was empathic, but I think more sympathetic and not using it as a tool...When I purposefully use it, it stops me from becoming overwhelmed, which is often what I'm worried about just because it's so sad. I feel so useless to take away the pain, so I used to just try to get parents to focus on doing things.... (P34)

Whakawhanaungatanga is central to partnership working across the system

Whakawhanaungatanga is a process for building relationships from an empathic stance. In the empathy compass, whakawhanaungatanga equates to the role of ‘connecting and supporting.’

“ It was so important to reach this Dad. I had to hold an empathic stance with him, he was so angry, we would not have got anywhere if I had have responded personally to his anger. Lots of practitioners had given up on him because he was pretty awful; there was really serious behaviour being displayed by his child and we couldn’t get to understand that through Dad if I couldn’t suspend my judgements about the Dad and use empathy to get alongside him and unpack what was going on with (childs name). (P16)

Whakawhanaungatanga is meeting families and other professionals where they’re at. Sometimes whānau want a brief greeting. Sometimes whānau want to share their whakapapa and tikanga before they can work with us. Both need practitioners to empathically attune and communicate their understanding of the whānau’s kaupapa. Whakawhanaungatanga – whether it’s with whānau, another professional or another organisation – is critical for a successful partnering relationship.

“ Am I going to be able to start engaging, skilled long-term people haven’t been able to get engagement with her. So I’m wondering what I’m going to be doing different. I rock up and rather than tell her all the things I can offer, just ask if we can chat and I listen, ...she talked about for the first 45 minutes and I knew the value. I absolutely needed to connect with this mum. (P19)

Relationships need to be purposeful

This theme connects to empathy as work. Relationships are a medium for making things happen for whānau and in teams and with others in the network. There needs to be a purpose for a relationship and that purpose is identified and negotiated with whānau, colleagues and with other colleagues across the network: Purpose shouldn't be assumed, they should be explicitly negotiated, this enables both partners able to enter into the relationship on the same page and with negotiated roles and expectations. This assists with the management of time and enables partners to consciously use the relationship in the work.

“ Valuing partnership and collaboration and actively using it to stay centred on the purpose really helped us develop a pathway that is completely family centred. (P5)

“ I don't mind the kitchen offloads, but I feel like I'm far more useful and holding using thinking caps, I mean you just decide before you launch into the story about what the reason for the conversation is. Marking the task is so good for keeping us on track (P25)

“ I think I've always been purposeful but what I've realised with this recent family is that I quickly build a rapport and then get on with what I think needs to happen, from the referral. This time I really sat and listened to the mum and the aunty and then we worked out how I could be helpful, so we were really paddling in the same direction (P19)

“ I'm much more purposeful with my supervision sessions with my staff, we talk about and agree what we need to talk about and how long we need to meet, then I try to follow what they need first (P22)

Tools that shape partnership behaviours are helpful

Tools help keep partnership in play: empathy, being intentional with thoughts and actions, checking in with partners about how the relationship is working for them. Good tools provide fail-safe cues for keeping partnerships on track. Tools help practitioners consciously practice their partnering skills with whānau, with colleagues and across the network.

“ Strengthening and holding constructs that value listening and paying attention to the family. ‘Don’t just do something! Be present and listen!’ that’s one of my favourites as well as ‘listen to understand not to respond’ I just think I need to shut up and practice listening, I need to use the tools and frameworks in all my practices. I know I talk too much, but now I have an alternative, it’s like building my strengths rather than just being wrong in all my talking but not knowing what to do instead.

Using ‘Thinking Caps’ to boundary and use the partnering framework in team and collegial conversations, it feels mutually respectful and really is partnering for just 10 mins sometimes and finding that you can move quite far (P33)

Partnering across the system integrates services

The understanding that the practitioner is part of a system of support, enables practitioners to partner with others in the network to deliver the assistance the whānau want and need. For example, practitioners can work with others who have an effective relationship with family rather than having to be another face in the support system crowd.

“ The disintegration grid gives clarity about problems (from everyone’s point of view, like stepping into their shoes from a distance) across the system for me and the client, it’s really empowering. (P41)

Conclusion for barriers and enablers

The barriers to partnering with whānau and across helping networks are not trivial. Grief, frustration, fear, and expectations to meet targets, and to be the expert, or to just get on with it encourage people to cope as best they can. For some, this is a process of closing down to the needs of whānau and the other professionals they work with. Closing down, or going through the motions, is dissatisfying for whānau and for practitioners. Whānau and their children don’t get the help they want or need.

A framework that recognises the emotional burden for whānau, and people supporting them, AND the tools to move with and through it in partnership and across the working ecology is offered in My Working World Framework. Ironically, fully engaging with a situation, rather than blocking it, provides the resources needed to help and ensures that when I practitioner meets a whānau, they are coming with partnership integrated into and supporting their entire working world.

Practicing Partnership in the real world: Three examples of practice change

Throughout we noticed practitioner's and managers alike were full of heart and care for the whānau they were working with, however it was conditional on them having time, feeling comfortable and not overwhelmed with stress, their own feelings, grief, and skill inadequacies (perceived or actual).

These three stories are intended to be integrative, demonstrating the value of using a shared relational framework and supporting tools (MWW) to enable partnership practices across the system, leading to better outcomes for whānau and their children. There have been 20 stories of partnership change collected in total, with many more shared via email and phone calls. At the time of writing we are working toward compiling all stories into a booklet.

Quotes from these and all other data have been used to demonstrate the enablers and barriers.



Practitioner + Family/Whānau

Partnership to facilitate whānau-led practice with families

Problem

Child at risk of being excluded from early childhood centre as he was hurting other children. Older brother also at the centre, staff describe brothers relationship as 'horrendous'. All 5 children been involved with Ministry in the past with little engagement with mother.

Outcomes

Developed a plan in partnership with both mother and centre that worked for everyone to get him and keep him in centre. Mother fully engaged in developing the plan and 'made some goals for herself to support her son at home by playing with him for 10 minutes each day, this led to her independently contacting the hippie-coordinator who supported her. She read the IY book about parenting and said to the worker 'Oh my god, that book is revealing. I've cried! I wasn't looking out for my boy. The older ones would whack him all the time, I stop that now.' On the 3rd visit mum said 'it's like a whole different family- everyone is so much calmer.'

Intervention

Whānau parent worker 'thought about importance of connecting and being felt as supportive to build a partnership'. Initially encouraged mother to 'talk about whatever she wanted', 'it was important to talk about our connections and know about her whānau relationships.' 'Asked mum to bring me up to speed' and asked her what she would 'like to happen'. Asked her 'if it was ok to get the lie of the land from the centre' and explained that it would be 'normal for them to have a slightly different picture, because they are standing in a different place'. Invited mum to join an IY programme to help connect her with other families and leaves mum with the IY book. Accessed funding to get additional support for boy in centre. Coached and modelled with mum to communicate with kids when there is fighting or conflict, this occurs in the moment.

Self-identified Practice changes

We're all on the same waka going down the same river. I built a relationship with the mother by being interested in her and not just talking at her about her child. I found out what the mother wanted instead of going in with my pre-made plan in my head and saying here this would be really good. I was careful with my language and stayed inviting rather than me paddling the waka in my own direction and on my own. Putting myself out there and modelling managing disagreements with mum, rather than just being the big I am and managing the behaviour for her. By thinking about the compass and reflecting, I could really think about whether it was helpful for the family - is this serving them or me?

How did their knowledge change?
How did their practice change?

Roles

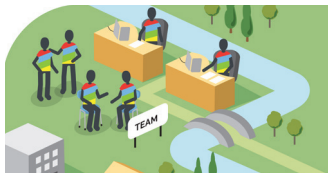
The whānau-worker describes taking a particular path into the engagement process by being supportive & connected 'talk about our connections and her whānau relationships'. She describes staying attuned and facilitating the conversation to retain the mother leading the work 'what would you like to see happen?', Also by seeking permission to 'get the lie of the land from the centre'. She moves gently into influencing offering her a book and place in an IY programme, and by modelling and sharing the process with mum in 'managing the boys behaviour.'

Empathy

She remains closely connected to mums feelings, attuning and holding previous experiences in mind - she is using empathy to approach the engagement. She communicates this by acknowledging the differences that are likely to arise 'normal for them to have a slightly different picture) and dynamically navigates not only the relationship with the mother but also with the centre staff, this enables a highly responsive approach to the system and leads into planning that addresses the problems highlighted at the beginning.

Sense-making

She considering the constructs that are floated in the services about the mother and actively reflects on this and how to start from a position of empathy. She described partnering as 'working things out together, whether its with a mum, or my colleagues or the wider team, I'm not on the waka alone, its much better to have everyones bits and pieces together.'



Practitioner + Team

Partnership to facilitate whānau-led practice in the team

Problem

The team works with complex families and often get overwhelmed and stressed with the work. They come to me and 'vent' for an hour, often leaving without any resolution and in high emotional states.

Outcomes

I was able to safely contain the emotional fallout experienced by the practitioner and model partnering when someone is really very emotional. She felt listened to and was assisted to move out of the whirlpool so she could complete the work required for the day. In the past I have had feedback that the team member might feel hurt and not listened to, now its the opposite and its fast, so partnership working can be demonstrated and experienced. I hear the team talking about how they are doing "Thinking Caps" all the time which is much better than what we did have 'under or above the line conversations, that were often just venting and not helpful and not great to be a part of or hear.

Intervention

Manager in a rehab service supporting a multi-disciplinary group of staff. Busy case review day with a distressed practitioner presenting, I would normally tell her to hold onto what she needed to 'offload', but instead offered her a 'Thinking Caps'. We only had 10 minutes and so I facilitated the steps, really insisting that she identify the issue, rather than ranting about the family. When we got to step 3, I was genuinely empathic, she looked relieved and was able to then empathise with the family.

Self-identified Practice changes

I now have a framework that allows me to manage team members safely and underpinned by the partnership compass when they are in a heightened emotional mind. I dont have to remember and so I dont get drawn into the whirlpool, which can happen if I'm busy or tired, or leave them drowning which is worse.

How did their knowledge change? How did their practice change?

Roles

By using the Thinking Caps framework the manager is able to facilitate the process of partnering in her team at times of high emotion. She is prompted to be purposeful '10 mins, insisted that she identify the issue', facilitates the process with fidelity, which has a 'containing' effect, she is influential in keeping the practitioner to the tasks, using empathy to decrease her arousal which enables the worker to then empathise with the family. The worker has an experience of being connected with and the entire process feels supportive in a reciprocal way 'I was safely able to...' 'she felt listened to and out of the whirlpool'.

Empathy

By choosing to use the Thinking Caps the manager is activating empathy for herself and the practitioner. She uses empathy with the practitioner to both reduce her arousal and activate her capacity to empathise with the family, this dials down her emotional state further and she is able to engage her thinking sufficiently to 'get out of the whirlpool and get on with the day'.

Sense-making

The manager describes construing the 'Thinking Caps' tool as a way to partner with a staff member, by making sense of what is needed in the moment for the practitioner and either withholding herself or giving at cost to herself and the team meeting, she is able to use the framework to navigate with the partnership compass.



Partnership to facilitate whānau-led practice across the network

Problem

An interdisciplinary team working together for 6 months were becoming overwhelmed in developing a pathway in relation to a specialised intervention in order for a child to leave hospital safely. The pathway was developed with the best interest of the child were central but without whānau. The professionals all contributing their expertise.

Outcomes

The pathway starts with the questions to the family and is a decision making tool to be used with the family not a risk-management plan.

Policies linked to be drawn on rather than front and centre

There is a mtg between professional and family to work through pathway Group explicitly stating a 'going forward will hold the family at the centre of any work'.

Intervention

Head of service (HOS) in health attended the meeting to get them 'back on track'.

Facilitated the discussion, drawing through everyone's 'point of view'.

'What is the outcome you (each professional) are wanting'; 'what about the family perspective'; 'who needs to be involved in decision making?'

Facilitated conversation led to collective decision.

Self-identified Practice changes

'Actively valuing partnership and collaboration between professionals and families.'

'Family centred thinking and decision making.'

'Empathy to build and sustain partnership across the system.'

How did their knowledge change? How did their practice change?

Roles

HOS deliberately used the Partnership Compass in this meeting, she said the intentional way she facilitated this meeting was helpful as she had a navigational tool she could use, she said this enabled a 'sharpening' of her practice. Prior to going into the meeting S had orientated towards the role of being purposeful ("get them back on track'). In the meeting she was both facilitative in an exploration ('facilitated conversation') and influential with the purpose ('developing a pathway') and returning to purpose ('collective decision').

Empathy

HOS used empathy to both navigate the discussion tuning into the problem and by inviting empathy in the group members in relation to the families for whom they were developing the pathway, this arguably generated empathy toward the families, that enabled the professional group to develop a pathway that would further promote partnership with the family ('pathway as a decision making tool rather than a pre-set plan'). Moving the families into the drivers seat and the experts into the navigation seat ('policies to be drawn on'). This modelled partnership in the network with the family at the centre, marking a change across a range of professionals ('going forward will hold the family at the centre of any work')

Sense-making

HOS describes making sense of how to approach this meeting by using the 'constructs' of partnership in My Working World, 'actively valuing partnership and collaboration' and makes sense of the components of the partnership compass, starting with 'empathy to build and sustain partnerships across the system.'

DISCUSSION

In this section, we reflect on what we have learned from this project.

Working with whānau is hard

Working with whānau with children with disabilities is hard for practitioners. It's hard because whānau are often experiencing grief. As people working with these whānau, practitioners are exposed to the whānau emotional worlds.

They bring tools to help with specific problems – assessing the practical needs of the family and their children – but training on how to best use these tools in a genuine partnership with families is less emphasised.

There is a science and art to working in whānau-led practice. The science comes from the knowledge and skill acquisition practitioners achieve in partnership practices. This involves the dynamic and living practices that are nuanced moment by moment to navigate the work whatever the purpose. As one participant said:

“ When you're working in partnership it feels like a dance: sometimes soft and seamless like a waltz, and sometime fiery and hot like a tango.

The science is the steps we learn, and the art is our own interpretation of the dance as a whole. (p 27).

Partnering with families/whānau enables practitioners to use their professional tools and supports when whānau are ready, partnering and moving forward alongside whānau at their pace and attuned to them.

Practitioners need a compass to help them

Skills need to be practiced and can be learned.

Thinking about the compass metaphor, when we are lost in the bush, we don't throw the compass away. If we're stressed, we might forget what we put in our backpacks (just in case). We have walked this track a hundred times, but in case the fog comes in and we wonder off the path, we know our compass is there.

In relationships, if practitioners always have the compass available, and practice using it, the compass becomes a worthy tool when they are working with families.

HERE'S A COMMON EXPERIENCE DESCRIBED TO US...

The Practitioner returns to a whānau month after month. The goals they have set, the goals that the whānau agreed to, are no further ahead as far as their assessments go.

What's the problem?

Practitioners refer to the compass and notice they have been on the influential path all along.

They developed the goals for the families and they gave families helpful advice and ideas about how to improve their child's life.

But nothing's changed, because they haven't connected with the whānau; they haven't listened or negotiated the goals. They haven't explicitly identified what the whānau wants and what resources and expertise the whānau has available so they can nurture that.

Participants repeatedly said that partnering with whānau led to a different sort of relationship. And that they elicited information that they wouldn't have received if they were going about their business as usual.

Barriers to whānau-led practice can be overcome by putting enablers centre stage

Practitioners can overcome the barriers to whānau-led practice, by making empathy their true north, their place to start and the place to return to when practitioners are stuck, lost, or overwhelmed. Having an empathic stance in their work, across their working world, enables practitioners to move alongside another person and guide or facilitate the journey. It also enables them to partner with their teams and other professionals to find the help they need for themselves and for the whānau they work with.

Barriers such as difference and conflict must be met with curiosity and listening – to seek to understand – not waiting to take a turn to highlight our difference or professional opinions.

Whakawhanaungatanga is meeting families and other professionals where they're at

Sometimes whānau want a brief greeting. Sometimes whānau want to share their whakapapa and tikanga before they can work with us. Both need practitioners to empathically attune and communicate their understanding of the whānau's kaupapa. Whakawhanaungatanga – whether it's with whānau, another professional or another organisation – is critical for a successful partnering relationship.

Building a system that encourages partnership requires walking the talk

People respond to cues in their social environments. If the values and practices of MWW are practiced throughout the system – partnership will be encouraged. If curiosity about other services is met with a lack of interest, a sense of competitiveness, or suspicion, partnership won't happen.

Practitioners can be more effective when they see the support network through a systems lens. Understanding what other services in the system offer, enables practitioners to source the best support for whānau.

Relationship skills can be learned. Practitioners need the space to fail safely

Practitioners know when they are doing their very best work. We found the stories practitioners told about their peak experiences, weren't necessarily about their 'technical' skills – but about times they'd partnered with people. That is, when they put the whānau in the driver's seat and navigated with them to a genuinely helpful solution.

Conversely, stories about practice failure, were times when practitioners reflected that they'd hadn't partnered with families. They assumed the 'expert' role, when connection was required. Or, they were pushing a family toward a solution they weren't ready for.

Empathy requires practitioners to attune to whānau – and know what is required in that moment, making the work easier to navigate simply by remaining present and attuned.

Reflecting on the way practitioners 'do relationships' is challenging

Uniformly, we found that practitioners were challenged by the idea of reflecting on their relationship with whānau and with other professionals.

Partnering is not just about getting people to like you. It's a framework for helping practitioners to work with what's on the table at the time, and work with it, respectfully. It's a framework that gives guidance on what practitioners need to do when things aren't working. Are we attuning? Are we connecting when we actually need to influence? Are we just too tired to attune properly?

It's hard work. But the skills can be learned. Practitioners don't need to be the experts all the time.

We have found the following 'stances' helpful for meeting the challenges of reflecting on practice. They apply to how practitioners approach others, and also how they (and we) think about ourselves.

- **Humility** – assuming other people have something to offer and being open to it
- **Compassion** – approaching people with kindness
- **Generosity** – giving people the chance to try things out; to fail and to succeed.
- **Curiosity** – not reacting to a situation, but wondering about what's going on for others, or yourself. It's about not immediately making a judgement or picture based on our own constructs (especially if bad stuff is going down) but exploring them within ourselves or with our relationship partners.

Partnering is not about 'fixing' situations or people; it's about staying attuned and moving with them

Practitioners can't always fix a situation. Somethings just 'are'. When someone is sad and gutted because they've lost something; a limb, a healthy child – they've lost something. They are sad and gutted. Empathy allows us to attune, or validate negative emotions, and move with the whānau or colleague when they're ready. Sitting with contradictory or difficult emotions and messages is a skill. Knowing when to connect, influence, or facilitate is a skill. And these skills can be learned. They have been learned by the cohorts of practitioners in this study.

CONCLUSION

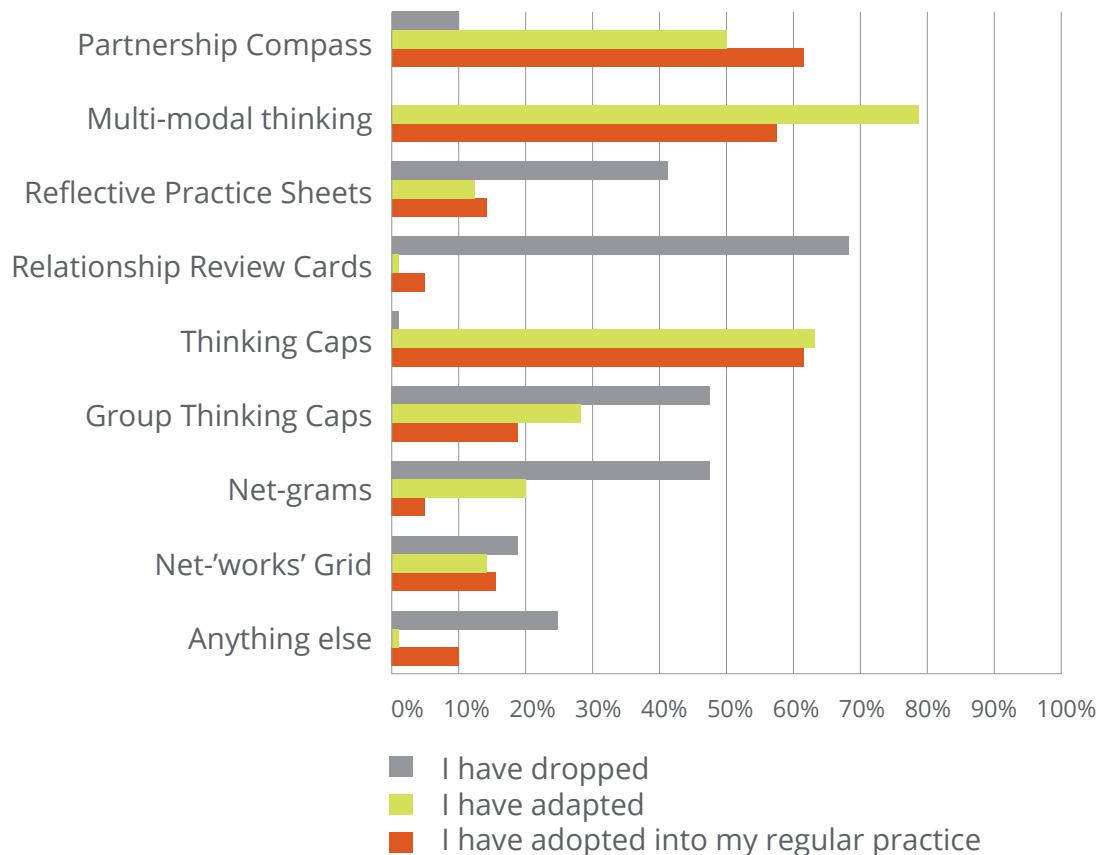
Strong international evidence suggests that paying attention to the knowledge, skills and practices that enable practitioners to build effective relationships is crucial to the successful and positive outcomes of any programme or intervention. By viewing the relationship as the active ingredient on which all other elements depend, practice – with whānau, across teams and the network – are enhanced and more effective³⁰.

My Working World enables practitioners from a wide range of backgrounds - health, education, social care, 'life experience' – to hone, reflect and celebrate their technical expertise while coming together in a coherent shared relational framework to maximise and accurately use their input with families thus heeding the call to focus with high specificity on the relationship.

This project has tested, refined and demonstrated that MWW and the empathy compass support family/whānau-centred helping processes. We found practitioners who engaged with MWW both understood the concepts offered and were able to implement them into their practice.

EMERGENT SUSTAINABILITY

Cohort One: Five months on



Cohort One continued using the Partnership Compass and My Working World concepts and principles in some way. They used Thinking Caps (one to one and groups) to structure helpful conversations with colleagues and their team – extending partnering across their working ecology.

There was some support for using the Net-‘works’ grid and Net-grams to explore, understand and coordinate the wider network around whānau.

There was low uptake of the Relationship Review cards. However, there was increased adoption and adaption with iterations introduced to Cohort Two and Three. Though there were more prototype adjustments to the Reflective Practice tool than any other, the uptake remained low. Latterly, we hypothesised that if we made the tool – Reflective Prompt cards to guide a facilitated conversation it may have been more acceptable, this was untested.

Exploring for Partnering Sustainability



WHAT NOW

Recommendations: Strengthening whānau-led practice across the disability sector in Aotearoa/ New Zealand

- An understanding that partnering is an integral part of the work we do, and we need to work consciously at it. The quality of the relationship is directly linked to good outcomes for whānau because it enables the right expertise to be applied at the right time.
- An understanding that partnering can be learned. It involves a set of skills and personal characteristics, with a particular understanding of partnership and the process of empathy.
- A shared evidence based relationship framework based on partnership and empathy, that is shared among people in the system, so it can be practiced, reinforced, encouraged.
- An understanding that people have a working ecology – they are part of a system. This means:
 - people are aware of other professionals in the system, as well as their own place within that system (the working ecology)
 - people know how to approach that system through partnership
 - how partnership is demonstrated throughout the practitioner's ecology influences the type of relationship that is developed with whānau
- An understanding that learning in partnership is part of a journey of change and it needs to be practiced at all levels of the system over the long term. It cannot be achieved, and then sustained, with a one-off training blast.

When working to create change toward a partnership paradigm, its important to:

- Be intentional in co-creating a partnership framework taking a systematic approach that synthesises best-evidence and local best practice
- Include a range of people across organisational hierarchies and from different organisations to build a shared language and understanding of partnership, and tools to support practice
- Use facilitation methods that model and coach partnership providing opportunities to develop a shared understanding of concepts, how they relate to practice and encouraging those practices
- Providing opportunities to practice relationship skills in the real world and come back to reflect on what works, what needs adapted and what's challenging
- Create opportunities within learning sessions for participants to 'experience' partnering – making it more than a theoretical exercise.
- Provide tools that are well-designed and appealing for people.

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END NOTES

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- 28 Day, Ellis & Harris 2015
- 29 Surplus reality is a term borrowed from psychodrama to describe the place where the full imagination of the practitioner can be laid out and adjusted in a real context.
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The image features a large, stylized graphic in shades of red and orange. The graphic consists of numerous thin, radiating lines that form a fan-like shape, with small circular dots scattered throughout. The background is a light blue gradient at the top, transitioning into the red/orange pattern below.

www.whatittakes.org.nz