Kia ora koutou. My name is Kate Harris and I am one of the senior teachers at Collectively Kids, and this is my colleague Zane McCarthy.

Thanks for joining us today. Zane will start off our presentation by referring to some of the theoretical perspectives and our own research carried out last year. I will then go on to discuss some of the more practical aspects of making inclusion happen - systems, processes, and practices (which we have developed over time.)

We apologise if this presentation seems a bit rushed. It is an edited version of a previous presentation that was much longer. As such we will make sure that all readings and information are available for you after the presentation, including the slides.

Hopefully we will have some time for questions at the end but if we run out of time for your questions, feel free to contact us via email. Also, we won't be asking you to fill in feedback forms at the end of the presentation but we would really appreciate any comments you may have on our presentation - content or delivery - so please feel free to email us.

Collectively Kids caters for approximately 40 families. There are 30 children each day, including up to 10 infants and toddlers. Our teaching team consists of 7 qualified teachers including Kate and me. We also have 2 work experience students who come 2 days a week each while they are studying at Unitec.

Collectively Kids has been an inclusive community for over 20 years. We have worked with children with a wide range of disabilities and medical conditions - including terminal illness - and we have never turned down a request, regardless of the disability of the child, if we had a space. On occasions those experiences have been challenging and sometimes sad but they have always added a huge amount to our community.

While being inclusive is something we do well, there is always more to learn. What is great about early childhood education is that constant adjusting of understanding and practice.

Inclusion is easy and it’s complicated. Te Whāriki offers us flexibility and a holistic approach that in theory fits very nicely with inclusion. Really, inclusion is just a part of the quality practices and relationships we should be aiming for in ECE. Here is a comment about the relationship between quality and inclusion from one of our parents who worked as a paediatrician in the UK specialising in children with neuro-disabilities:

“… it reflects really well on the standards and philosophy of a daycare when the parents of a child with special needs choose to send their child to you. They have so many considerations when choosing a place for their children, that in my experience
it was the best daycares that were able to meet the needs of this group of children well.”

However the impact of real life can make inclusion difficult in ECE centres. Some of those difficulties have to do with the challenges in ECE: qualifications; staff stability; financial constraints; and limited support (for instance - the structure of Education Support Worker hours available from 3 years of age and not over holidays). Some of the barriers amongst teachers, management, and families have to do with attitudes and fears around disability within society. Others involve the complicated lives of families who have young children with special needs. They are often just coming to terms with a diagnosis and sometimes don’t even have that. The future is uncertain, the present can be exhausting. There are often multiple agencies that parents have to deal with, as well as the anxiety around finding an ECE setting (their child’s first educational setting), and then leaving their precious child with people they don’t know very well.

The literature we read stresses that a rights based approach is crucial to successful inclusion. That means looking at the rights of the child rather than taking a deficit approach that focuses on the disability. To be inclusive an educational setting has to support presence (the right to attend), as well as participation and achievement. In addition, it is suggested what is most important is our attitude, the philosophy that guides the centre, and particularly the relationships within our community. Here is one of our parents talking about these issues:

And a comment from a professional who works in special education:

“...most of my work as a professional working in both early childhood and school settings targets presence and participation for long periods of time before we can even tackle achievement for these children. High staff turnover rates do make it difficult for everyone and happen often at centres. As a professional working with children with special needs my mantra, for lack of a better word, is "expect more"... children with special needs should be expected to achieve more and more each day - after all isn't that what we expect of typically developing children?...”

We just want to highlight the importance of the sequence. First presence, then participation, then achievement. Centres are going to be at different stages of this journey and that is fine, you do what you can do but just make sure that you continue to make progress, to learn and to develop.

One of our focuses in the opening statement of our philosophy is for all children, no matter their age, ethnicity, gender, ability, or background have the right to participate.
A big focus of our environment policy is, not surprisingly on environmental issues but it also includes addressing issues of social justice within the centre. The right of families with children with special needs to attend the centre of their choice, to participate fully in the community and to know that children are making progress is an issue of social justice. It should be the everyday experience of families but that’s not the reality currently.

When anyone comes to visit Collectively Kids we do our best to welcome them warmly and we take time to explain our approach, which includes talking about our focus on the environment and inclusion. We aim to be particularly welcoming when families with children with special needs visit because we are aware that these parents have often had bad experiences at other centres.

Here is a comment from one of our parents:
“Honestly I had been to eight different centres and just had looked around and gone this is so not the right place for her. I was really distraught about where I was going to place her and what I was going to do … It was the sterility to their approach… you’ve got a microcosm of a bigger society and you’re inclusive in it. There’s a lot of exclusion out there and there’s a respect here that you can automatically feel.”

And another comment from a professional working in Special Education
“Without support from Special Education parents find that they are turned away from centres because their child has special education needs that the centre is unable to cater for. When Special Education is involved to support the family into a centre we very rarely come across this barrier.”

We expect the centre to change when any new family joins us. There will be adjustments for all of us to make, not just for the family that joins us, and we see that change as a positive thing. There may be more change when a child with special needs joins the community but from the very first moment of walking in the door that child is viewed as an individual who can contribute and thrive. Our focus is on the child and the family not the diagnosis, however interesting that might be. It is not necessarily relevant to the way we work with children. Essentially we work with all children in the same way – we look at where they are at, what interests them, try to extend their learning, celebrate progress and engage positively with any problems along the way. The celebration of progress is particularly important because it gives families something to focus on, as opposed to measuring their child against “normal” development.

As I said before literature about inclusion suggests that genuine inclusion goes beyond presence. Children have the right to participate and they have the right to achieve. If you focus on a child as a child, rather than the limited expectations you might have or the problems you expect, then these three things are not hard to
achieve. You might have to work harder, learn new skills, be super creative and flexible but if you get it right then there can be phenomenal progress – not just in the children but in the health and well-being of their families. And beyond in our community – families really value inclusion at CK and our children are very tolerant and supportive.

As you can see from the quotes on this slide of parents who attended a meeting on inclusion, it isn’t just families of children with special needs who feel the positive impact of inclusion. That they see their children benefiting from the experiences of playing and learning alongside children with special needs.

Finally it’s important to remember that all of us have special needs/problems at some point in our lives. As part of our commitment to social justice and a more equitable society we have supported several families, teachers and friends during times of illness, loss, and financial stress. These are issues we need to engage with positively, they are opportunities to learn and grow.

Kia ora koutou.
I am going to speak about the systems, processes, and practices at Collectively Kids that support Inclusion.

We have already mentioned PRESENCE, PARTICPATION and ACHIEVEMENT, and as I outline the different ways we aim to support inclusion, you will (hopefully) be able to see these in action.

Firstly, we aim to achieve PRESENCE from the time children are placed on our waitlist. Special needs, and special family needs, are target groups for our waitlist. We also contact Group Special Education when we have spaces in case they know of families looking for a centre.

Part of the overall achievement of inclusion for us includes good working conditions and staff stability. In addition, Collectively Kids has always been committed to employing qualified teachers. We are part of an NZEI collective contract which has great working conditions including weekly, rostered, non-contact time for every teacher. We also have a stable roll and most children stay at the centre from 0-5. So, this means we know each other as a teaching team really well and we get to know children and their families really well too.
Transitions

Positive experiences when transitioning are important for all children. For families of children with special educational or medical needs, this is often even more so. Positive transitions enhance inclusive practice.

For all children transitioning into the centre home visits are offered before, or just after, they begin. Two teachers visit the child and their family at home for about an hour. The visits are generally relaxed and informal and can be really beneficial, especially when establishing a trusting relationship with whānau. The discussion and notes from the visit then inform planning and the development of goals which are shared with the family and within the team. Home visits can also provide another opportunity for parents to share their aspirations for their child with kaiako.

The following comment is from a parent who had visited 8 centres before coming to us. A home visit occurred before the child started, and here she is discussing the settling-in process for her daughter at the centre. She begins by explaining what she had found in other centres:

“There were things like: You weren’t allowed to come and visit; they expected you to just hand the kids over and that would be it; whereas I spent probably two months getting D settled here and you were welcoming of me. That process was both heartfelt, but it also made me have immense trust in the decision that we made in where we were putting her. Being able to go back to work with that peace of mind was huge.”

We work hard to have honest, meaningful relationships with whānau.

Transitions within the centre are also managed in a conscious and planned way.

This may be for example when a child turns two, Education Support Worker (or ESW) hours begin, or when there are changes to their days or hours of attendance.

For all children turning two a transition plan is already in place and they may already be spending periods of time in the over twos’ area. There is however enough flexibility between the areas for them to still spend time in the under twos’ at different times of day, according to their individual needs or preferences. This also applies to children with special needs who sometimes need a longer transition process.

When children with special needs are transitioning to school we may assist with school visits. This would be planned for within the Individual Planning process.
If school visits are planned, a staff member will usually visit the school and the class a child will be going into. This is usually done in the rostered ESW time. We see a visit to a primary school classroom as professional development. This time is also used for the development of resources like social stories for example, which are used to support the transition to school.

Next, we have a flexible programme and routines where all children are given uninterrupted and extended time according to their needs and abilities. For example we have floating snack times, nappy changing and toileting routines are flexible, and the only really structured time of the day is at the end of the morning when we have a group tidy up, mat time and lunch. However, even at these times there is flexibility - depending on the needs and interests of the children there that day. This is of particular significance for children with special needs who may need more time, or may be more focussed at certain times of the day.

In addition, there is a flexibility in terms of the attitude and culture of the centre and a willingness to adjust our thinking when needed.

When considering an issue we consider the multiple perspectives, and we really do see it as a learning opportunity for us both personally and professionally. Related to this is the fact that we also have clear policies and procedures for all children and a clear statement of inclusive practice.

So, if there are issues to be addressed we have clear procedures that involve respectful communication with all parties. It is vital that other related policies - for example social competence, and complaints - are clear and explicit. An example that comes to mind which illustrates this is of a child we had at the centre several years ago. He had quite challenging behaviours which included throwing furniture and unpredictable lashing out. So, when looking for strategies, we considered not only his rights and his need to stay – or participate and achieve - at the centre, but also: his mother’s wellbeing; our own professional safety and wellbeing; the rights and safety of the other children, and input from professional agencies like Group Special Education. We also considered the other parents and families and communicated with them about what was happening. This was hard, and exhausting, but he always remained a valued member of the centre community and his progress - his achievement - was indeed celebrated by all.

At Collectively Kids we focus on community care in terms of teaching and relationships. Children are encouraged to look after one another, tuakana teina relationships are noticed and encouraged, and all teachers share responsibility for the participation and achievement of all children.
Our first responsibility to all children is a duty of care – things like making sure they are safe, warm, fed and are having adequate fluids. For some children with special needs this can take considerable time and effort, and often technical knowledge – for instance children with feeding issues.

Participation and achievement don’t just happen – they require expert and frequent intervention from teachers. This can range from facilitating social interactions to making sure children can access all areas and resources in the centre. Children may have mobility or even motivation issues which limit their independent movement and accessing of centre resources. It is therefore often a case of teachers not only noticing but also ‘seizing the moment’ to support this active participation.

Expertise built up over the years.

We have always had a number of children with special needs or specific medical conditions. We are proactive – if we don’t know, then we ask for help.

We contribute ideas and a clear picture of where children are at for Individual Plan Meetings (or IP’s). We access professional development relevant to supporting children currently at the centre. For example last year we had several children using Makaton to support their communication so we organised other centres to come in and join us for a workshop on Makaton offered by GSE.

Parents have also commented that they appreciate any advice we can offer. This comment was made by a parent of a child who has been at the centre since she was a baby and was working towards transitioning to school, later that year:

“I don’t really have any other centre to compare it to so... But anywhere we have been unsure there has always been heaps of support and heaps of advice…I feel really reassured asking for your advice and finding out what you think with your experience of sending others through the process.” (parent, centre meeting, 18 June 2014)

ESW (or Education Support Worker) hours.

In the past Education Support Workers (or ESWs) were employed by the Ministry of Education from outside the centre to work with children from the age of 3 - provided they qualified for funding. Now teachers from the centre take on the ESW hours and the centre has the contract with Ministry. It costs a bit more but we find it is well worth it - we already know all the children well and we can build on those
relationships. In addition, all teachers spend time doing this rather than just one person. We have found this is working much better, however we realise not all centres have this luxury. While previous ESW's employed by Ministry were able to monitor the child’s safety (their presence) there was not always effective or consistent support for participation or achievement. For centres who do have ESWs coming in for sometimes short periods to support children (during term time only), it is especially important the culture of the centre and systems exist which promote the inclusion of the child and the ESW. Clear communication of centre goals with the ESW and opportunities to work as a genuine team member are imperative.

With regards to ESW hours and the fact we all work with the children, one of our parents commented:

“I want to see is that a connection is made with G. That G is given opportunities to make connections. That there is time for that so that he can connect with you all individually and his peers. And you connect with him. And also what I think you do really well here is that he’s not stuck with a teacher aide. That the children are not seeing G as somebody that has somebody with him..” (parent, centre meeting, June 18 2014)

In addition, we find that because we all work (as ESW) with a child there are those multiple views and experiences of that child.

For those centres who still have ESWs coming into the centre employed by Ministry the following are some comments made by someone from Group Special Education, who works with children and teachers in ECE centres and schools.

“We have some ESW's who "velcro" themselves to the children. This is usually because they don't feel comfortable in the centre amongst the staff or have a poor understanding of their role. An ESW should be treated as another staff member - invite her to staff outings, staff meetings to build that relationship. I encourage the ESW's that I work with to attend the session even if the child that they work with is away sick. This helps them to build a relationship with the other children in the centre. This can be really beneficial in terms of fostering peer interactions for the child with special education needs.” (via email to centre)

(She also commented :Your ESW is an extra set of hands, USE HER!! I often remind teachers that the ESW is there to support much like a teacher aide does at a school. They are called teacher aides because they aide the teacher, they are not child aides.)
We record ESW notes on Google Drive. This includes notes from IP meetings, the current goals we are working on and evaluating progress. Recording notes this way means everyone can access and contribute to them at any time.

Children also have ‘communication books’. These go between the centre and home and include notes on what the child has done throughout the day. This is especially important for children who are non-verbal.

We have a good relationship with GSE and other agencies that involves mutual respect, and the sharing of information. Other professionals come in to the centre and time is made to meet with them if appropriate and share information. This is very much a two-way process.

As one of our colleagues at GSE pointed out:

“When we visit centres we often get asked "who are you here to work with?" I like to respond "you". There is still that age-old prediction that we are coming in to work specifically with the child rather than give advice, support and guidance to the adults that work with the child every single day - and can follow through on these suggestions every single day!” (via email, June 2014)

Staff sit in on IP’s (new staff sometimes attend too as observers as part of their induction to the centre and professional development).

Other resources such as social stories – both group and individual stories to support children are also used at the centre

In addition to the things I have already mentioned, we also try and have active engagement within the community about disability. We are situated in a mixed residential area in which there are health units including physical rehabilitation, mental health facilities, and CADs (amongst others). So whenever we go out with the children we often encounter a variety of people. We are honest with the children about disability and some of the issues surrounding it. Two members of our local community, Dugald and K, are regular visitors to the centre. Dugald has Cerbral Palsy and uses a wheel chair. He pops in twice a week to do shopping for us (for which we pay him) and sometimes more often if there’s a party or event on! K is another neighbour who does knitting, which we sell at the centre on her behalf.

Two of our parents referred to Dugald when they commented about our inclusion policy:

“ [we] just wanted to comment how positive we think the CK inclusion policy is. It’s so important for our children to be immersed in whole society, and to see that sometimes others may not walk or talk the same but that we can all learn and live together. From the outset we’ve been so impressed with CK and that
the policy is so supportive and that we’ve made some lovely friends here that we might not have met otherwise.

On a personal note B pointed out Dugald the other day collecting his prescription from the chemist and was proud to point him out and tell me all about his special wheelchair. It really was so nice to hear her explaining to me and that it was the most ordinary thing ever to have friends in a wheelchair” (parent, feedback via email)

Lastly, we also regularly write letters advocating for the interests of children to government and this always includes a section about social justice and inclusion. This topic is also discussed with visiting MPs and was one of the topics for discussion with local MPs at a meeting for the CK community prior to the election.

These are some of the ways in which we as a team, and as a community, work to support inclusion at Collectively Kids and within our wider community. We hope that by sharing our experiences we can also support you in your work. We are also keen to hear from others their successes and challenges so please feel free to get in touch.

That concludes our presentation.

Thank you.