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Lessons learned from the Circles of Care Programme**

Author

Branch, Sara, Homel, Ross, Freiberg, Kate

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**Making the Developmental System Work Better For Children:
Lessons Learned Implementing an Innovative Programme**

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Sara Branch¹, Ross Homel² and Kate Freiberg³

1. Research Fellow
2. Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice
3. Senior Research Fellow

Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance, Griffith University, Australia

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Please forward correspondence to:
Dr Sara Branch
Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance
Mt Gravatt Campus - Griffith University
176 Messines Ridge Road
MT GRAVATT QLD 4122 AUSTRALIA
Telephone: +61 (0)7 373 55666
Fax: +61(0)7 373 56985
Email: s.branch@griffith.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Pathways to Prevention is an early prevention project founded on developmental systems theory operating through a schools-community agency-university partnership in a socially disadvantaged area of Brisbane. Circles of Care is a Pathways programme also implemented on a small scale by the same agency in a regional city. The Circles programme is designed to strengthen connections between schools, families and community services and harmonise activities in these settings by surrounding children with identified needs with a supportive group of adults. A Circle, which includes at least the child, parent(s), teacher and agency staff, sets goals, mobilises resources for the child, family and school, and monitors progress. The client is conceptualised not as the child but as a dysfunctional developmental system, with better outcomes for children the ultimate goal. Qualitative evaluation at the two sites showed that while Circles worked well at the level of practical support and relationship building and did achieve good child outcomes, its capacity to achieve collaborative practice and strengthen system relations was limited by entrenched organizational structures and cultures. However, one site, with more support for collaboration across organizational boundaries, suggested that system alignment is achievable on a larger scale with vision and leadership for organizational reform.

INTRODUCTION

Australia is a very wealthy nation, often referred to as the ‘Lucky County’ (Horne, 1964). This prosperity has however not translated into world beating scores on a wide range of population-level health and social outcomes for children and young people (ARACY, 2008; Emerson, 2010), with family stress, poor educational outcomes and a range of other problems being especially concentrated amongst families and children in the most disadvantaged 1.5 percent of the 2147 Australian localities studied by Vinson (2007). Chaotic child rearing environments and entrenched social disadvantage are prominent examples of “inherently wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160) which due to their complexity, multidimensionality, and resistance to change require holistic responses that cannot be achieved by one organization or agency alone (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Gray, 1985). This has led, amongst other proposals, to calls for service integration. The Pathways to Prevention project was developed, in part, in response to this call.

Pathways is a partnership between national community agency Mission Australia, Griffith University, and local schools, and is based on the assumption that mobilising social and economic resources to support children, families and their communities before problems emerge is more effective and economically efficient than intervening when problems have become entrenched (Homel, 1999, 2005). The first phase of the project, which was focussed on the transition to school in the most disadvantaged urban area in Queensland (Freiberg *et al.*, 2005; Homel *et al.*, 2006), involved the integration of family support programmes with preschool programmes in seven local schools, delivered within a community development framework. Based on this work the project expanded into the primary school years, with schools and community agencies attempting to work together to assist families in need. In practice however, it often proved to be extremely difficult to harmonise these different worlds, with schools and agencies tending to operate in parallel according to their own

organizational imperatives. The need to foster more collaborative practices led the authors as research partners to propose a new approach, which developed into the Circles of Care Programme (Circles) operated by Mission Australia as part of Pathways in partnership with the seven participating schools in Brisbane (Freiberg *et al.*, 2010). With support from the research team, Circles was subsequently implemented on a small scale by a different Mission Australia team in one school in a regional centre of Queensland.

Although Circles has now mostly moved to a universal platform (supporting the transition to school for whole preparatory grade classes), the phase described in this paper (2007-2010) was focused on individual children referred with specific needs. Circles aims to surround children with identified needs with a supportive community throughout their primary school years. It provides a practical way for adults who are important to the child's development to meet around a common table. Circles focuses on connecting, strengthening and harmonising relations between these different people and their organizations with a view to setting goals and providing ongoing support, encouragement and advocacy for the child (and their family) in a consistent and coordinated way. *Thus, Circles seeks to make connections that might not otherwise exist, and in that sense the focus for intervention is the functionality of the whole system of relations between levels of organization rather than 'the child client'.* As long experience makes clear, however, building such connections is much easier said than done. In the history of service integration "one is struck by its nobility of intent, its tenacity of purpose, and its ineffectiveness in implementation" (Bruder, 2005, p. 31).

This paper outlines the philosophy of the Circles of Care Programme and its foundations in developmental system theory, describes how it works, and presents results from a qualitative evaluation of two contrasting and geographically distant sites for work conducted between 2007 and 2010. We find that Circles worked well at the level of practical

support and relationship building, but less well as a way of strengthening and harmonising organizational linkages – although one site clearly demonstrated that such system reform is well within reach.

DEVELOPMENTAL SYSTEMS THEORY AND COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

Circles, and the larger Pathways to Prevention Programme, have been strongly influenced by developmental systems theory (DST; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 2002; Lerner & Castellino, 2002), which builds partly on Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) as well as on a range of other theoretical work in psychology and evolutionary biology (e.g., Gottlieb, 1991). The defining elements of Ford and Lerner’s theory are temporal dynamics and dynamic self-organization: change over time is fundamental. These theorists reject the notion of nature and nurture as distinct entities or processes, and instead view “human development as part of an inextricably fused developmental system” (Lerner, 2002, p. 188). The central aspect of DST is that an individual is understood and develops within levels of organization (e.g., biological, family, community, and society) that interact with each other in complex ways that vary over time. As Figure 1 illustrates, at the centre of a child’s world are their intra-individual characteristics, including physical health and capabilities, temperament and attitudes (Lerner & Castellino, 2002). Each level beyond the child also has its own attributes, such as single parent family, culturally diverse school, or ‘child friendly’ community. Each of these levels is considered to be structurally and functionally integrated. Hence development does not begin at birth, it is a complex process that is shaped by history, cultural change, and enduring human institutions, as well as the manifold ways that individuals negotiate and act upon their environments (Spencer *et al.*, 2009).

INSERT FIGURE I HERE

It follows from DST that the focus of preventive interventions should not be on changing the individual or their environments alone, but on *changing the relations between the different levels of organization in the developmental system*. A practical outworking of this principle is that agencies and institutions ideally need to operate within a framework of collaborative practice, characterised by a blurring of the boundaries between organisations and by harmonious, mutually supportive practices in families, schools, community agencies, and other key settings.

While bringing people together in partnership is not a new concept, the practice of shared responsibility for the wellbeing of children and their development is relatively new (Samson & Stephenson, 2004). Boyes-Watson (2005), in her discussion of Peacemaking Circles, argues that organizations such as schools and community agencies face considerable difficulties in being both *responsible* within their own organizational framework and *responsive* to the needs of individuals. For example, teachers are responsible for a child's educational outcomes and counsellors responsible for their emotional wellbeing, but nobody is willing or able to respond to the needs of the whole person. Parents do of course try, but without the assistance of others can often fail, especially if they are experiencing the stresses common in socially disadvantaged areas. The purpose of Circles is to overcome this historical failure of organizations to support children effectively by bringing together key players in order to strengthen and harmonise relations.

WHAT CIRCLES OF CARE LOOKS LIKE

Circles was designed to enable adults who are significant to the development of a child to understand and respond to the child's life in context, providing seamless access to learning and social support services. A Circle typically consists of the child and the child's family, teacher, principal, and Circles of Care community worker and/or coordinator. The Circle can

also include other members such as extended family, a teacher aide who speaks the family's language, and other professionals such as a learning support teacher and professionals from outside the school.

The programme began in 2007 at Site One, a residential cluster of suburbs surrounded by light industrial estates. At this site four personnel (one coordinator and three community workers) worked with seven primary schools to assist 43 children (32 boys and 11 girls aged between 5 and 11 years) and their families. The community workers had extensive experience working with families, especially from their own ethnic communities, but did not have professional qualifications. The role of the coordinator was to support and guide the community workers, but staff turnover meant that at times the community workers were not fully supported. Circles began in 2009 at the second site, a rapidly growing regional centre that now faces some of the highest unemployment in the country. At this site work was carried out by one coordinator at one school, although given staff turnover there were three personnel in total, all trained in social work or teaching. Six children (all boys aged between 7 and 10 years) and their families were involved in Circles with additional effort being concentrated at the same time on the universal version in this and another school. Most Circles children had medium to high needs and were identified by schools, with a smaller number referred by government agencies. Presenting issues included withdrawn or aggressive behaviour, health difficulties, and isolation related to language or cultural differences. Reflecting the systems approach, it was usual for all members of the family (including siblings) and not just the focus child to receive support.

Circles works through a plan, implement and review process. Regular meetings where all members of the Circle participate are key to this process. Ideally each Circle would come together once per school term but often in practice meetings occurred less frequently at Site One. At the initial meeting members discuss their relationship with the child and how s/he

behaves in their respective contexts. While not a requirement the attendance of children at Circles meetings is desirable, as attendance provides them with an opportunity to join in with the group's conversation, contribute to decisions if they wish and, critically, gain a sense of the way the caring adults in their life are connected. Importantly, the decision to include children in meetings is at the discretion of each Circle, with the presenting issues and the needs of the child the overriding concerns. This approach aims to give each member, including the child, a voice that is heard in developing a holistic understanding of the child and their needs (France & Homel, 2006). It is through discussions about individual members' hopes and concerns for the child that goals and strategies are identified and an action plan developed, with members agreeing to tasks they will complete before the next meeting. At following meetings the goals and strategies are reviewed and adjusted where necessary.

Circles is similar in some respects to programmes based on restorative practices, such as family group conferencing (Braithwaite, 2007), and to coordination models within the disability field (e.g., Team Around the Child: Limbrick, 2009). It also shares many characteristics with case management, such as providing continuity of care across organizations and time, and increasing access to services and improving accountability (Intagliata, 1982). However, Circles differs from these models by taking a collaborative approach in order to blur "the boundaries between agencies" (Keast *et al.*, 2007, p. 19) and to harmonise the routine practices of families and schools, two enduring developmental institutions. This can challenge Circle members' usual practices, especially those of teachers and community workers who will typically be more used to traditional case management. If anything Circles' community workers are systems managers and not case managers, and so the question '*Does the approach by Circles of Care strengthen the connections between levels of organization that surround a child?*' was a focus of the evaluation.

METHOD

As research partners in the Pathways Project we understand evaluation as “a social relational practice” (Abma & Widdershoven, 2008, p. 214) in which we are co-workers with parents, teachers and community workers in helping to foster positive child developmental pathways. We believe this value commitment is by no means inconsistent with scientific openness about the effectiveness in practice of any specific Pathways activity, or indeed of larger aspects of the project such as governance. In our role as research partners we have established close working relationships with Mission and (to a lesser extent) school staff over a ten-year period. We argued strongly for the Circles approach because of its foundation in theory and potential to promote more collaborative arrangements. We have also argued since the project’s inception for rigorous evaluation based on systematic recording of the complex patterns of participation in the many Pathways activities, and both quantitative measurement and systematic qualitative analysis of child and family outcomes. In this paper we have drawn on our qualitative work to report what we intend to be an objective evaluation of the effectiveness of the Circles Programme and its implementation.

The first author conducted 22 half hour semi-structured interviews and surveyed 20 respondents through questionnaires. Interviews involved three principals, six teachers and two parents at Site One and a principal and three teachers at Site Two. Seven interviews were conducted with Circles staff, three at Site One and four at Site Two (three Circles personnel and the agency manager). The interviews, which were recorded for transcription, probed several themes related to: the interviewee’s understanding of Circles; how it had assisted them; perceptions of changes made in the practices of the school, family, or community agencies; and comments on the strengths of the approach and challenges encountered.

Unfortunately due to language and time constraints interviews with more parents were not possible. In order to ensure the voice of parents was captured an end-of-year

questionnaire probing the same themes as the interviews was forwarded to all Circles parents and teachers at Site One. In total 11 parents and nine teachers of children in Circles at Site One completed this survey. Plans to interview children were abandoned after the difficulties experienced with organizing interviews with parents, but extensive data from children have been collected in the wider Pathways Project.

One limitation of any face-to-face interview study is that the participants may not express themselves truthfully (Catania, 1999). This may be due to a desire to please the researcher or present a better picture. The researcher was therefore careful to maintain a friendly but neutral stance. NVivo (Bazeley, 2007) was used to organise themes emerging from the data, beginning with the themes explored in the interviews (Figure 2). Given the small numbers in some categories, in presenting comments from respondents we have avoided providing information about the source that would breach confidentiality, including the site respondents were from.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

RESULTS

What is Circles of Care?

Two major themes emerged. The first, emphasised by 20 participants, was that Circles *assists children and their families to receive support and guidance*. Interestingly, seven teachers and seven parents from Site One referred to Circles as a support service for children and their families. This perhaps reflected the direct support that parents received and teachers observed, or that the community workers were seen as responsible for the provision of a service. By contrast, none of the school staff interviewed at Site Two referred to Circles as a supporting agency, while two of the four Circles personnel referred to how the programme

facilitated a network that supported the family. This relates to the second theme, *connecting levels of organization*, referred to by 22 respondents. While participants mainly referred to the connection between home and school, a number also talked about linking with community services for the family and the school. Indeed, principals, teachers and the Circles personnel considered that one of the roles of the community workers was to connect home and school with each other and to other services.

Circles as a bridge to better relationships

Most Circles families have been alienated from school because of language barriers, cultural factors, or (especially for indigenous people) historically disastrous experiences with government, so overcoming the school-family gulf was a primary objective. Circles community workers commented that they saw themselves as a bridge between home and school, and other interviewees and survey respondents supported this view. One principal saw Circles as helping teachers and the school achieve what they always wanted to do but didn't have the time, resources or expertise to do alone. In total 27 participants reflected on how Circles acts as a bridge between schools and families. For example:

I think for families there is a lot of fear about institutions and anything that helps build bridges in that relationship and helps people feel confident – it's a real bonus. (Interview – Principal 3)

One Circles worker commented on how Circles had helped families break down isolation arising from language and culture, while others reported how parents connected with other community members and in some cases with other Circles mothers through, for example, participation in parenting courses. Moreover, there was evidence that home and school were brought into closer alignment, as in the following case:

There is one family ... we were having difficulties with communicating and getting messages across to the family, they were suspicious and untrusting of the school ... the [Circles] process

enabled trust to be developed so that we could get them to follow through with the things we needed to do with that student at home and to work with the school rather than working against the school ... he has improved out of sight now. (Interview – Principal 2)

Relationship building between Circles meetings was often noted. For example, Circles community workers reported encouraging parents to participate more in school, with both teachers and the workers inviting parents into the classroom. In total, 19 participants mentioned how they had a better relationship with each other (i.e., between home and school):

With the kids that are involved [in Circles] the relationship I have with the parents is REALLY close, I can approach them anytime and they're the same ... it is coming from both ends, it is not just me contacting them, if they think there is something I should be aware of they let me know. (Interview – Teacher 7)

In addition to building relationships with schools, nine parents remarked how Circles had linked them to medical, social, welfare and other support systems. For some parents the support the Circle as a whole was able to give to them, especially with medical and educational assessments, proved invaluable. One teacher at Site Two referred to how *“Circles made the school an intervention centre cum medical centre, all kinds of centre”*. Moreover Circles provided a bridge to services for schools, not just for families. For example, one principal at Site One valued Circles meetings because they brought people from a range of services together in the same room. However, this theme was emphasised more often at Site Two, where teachers stated how they and not just the students now had somewhere to go when they needed help.

Because [the students] are linked into other agencies I can contact [the agencies] directly and say look I am having this problem have you got any ideas about this ... [before Circles] I wouldn't [have] known where to go. (Interview – Teacher 7)

Circles as a bridge to better understanding

Most teachers said that the Circles meetings were helpful because they provided them with insights into the child's life beyond school. Comments from parents, principals and Circles personnel supported this, with 20 participants in all referring to how Circles increased home-school understanding. Understanding the family context appears to have been particularly important for school personnel:

Well it gives you background knowledge – and we need background knowledge of those children to help them, if we don't know they have a problem at home well we cannot understand what's happening at the home and what problems they are bringing to school.

(Interview – Teacher 2)

In addition, one of the principals spoke of how the Circles meetings developed teachers' understandings of the child's environment and trust between parents and school:

The thing that stands out is the teachers saying 'oh so that is what is going on'; 'I understand now'; 'oh that is why ...' so they have a greater understanding and empathy of the situation. It allows them to make the adjustments to the way they treat and behave towards the children ...

(Parents) are not as fearful. They understand us better and we understand them better, the trust has been grown on both sides. (Interview – Principal 2)

Thus, it appears that Circles facilitated a process that enabled members to connect with each other, share vital personal information, harmonise practices, and understand each other better, indicating success in achieving the goal of helping key adults from different developmental contexts to see the child in a more holistic way. An important element in this appeared to be the inclusion of parents in the meetings since they held information of which others were typically not aware.

Changes made by teachers and parents

As a result of the Circles process and the understanding it fostered teachers were able to make adjustments to their practices. In particular, teachers commonly reported adjusting their responses to the child's behaviour, becoming more flexible or adjusting their teaching techniques by, for example, placing the child in a smaller group. Teachers also supported parents with reading or activities they could do with the child at home. For example:

Some teachers have made significant shifts, one volunteering to continue to support child's reading once child transitioned school years. Most teachers adjust their teaching styles/behaviours once they gain an understanding for what the child is going through at home or has been through in the past. (Interview – Circles Worker 1)

Parents reported changing their parenting, for example, using more positive parenting techniques and having more routines (e.g., behaviour charts). The two parents interviewed both said that through attending their child's lessons (as a result of encouragement from the Circles community worker) and through interactions with teachers they were able to learn strategies they could use at home with their children. However, perhaps the most significant change was in parents' connection with the school and willingness to attend school events, or just talk to their child's teacher:

[Parents have a] greater engagement with school ... Engagement with school is the key thing, it means they are working with us not against us. (Interview – Principal 4)

Improvements in child behaviour

At both sites most parents, teachers, principals and Circles personnel noted a number of improvements over time, with children's behaviour becoming more manageable and school attendance improving. For example:

This helped the oldest of the boys engage with learning, he has settled right down, I don't see him as much as I used to which is good (Interview – Principal 4).

We discussed the importance of school [at the Circle's meeting] ... and [the children's] attendance shot right up (Interview – Circles Worker 7).

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Collaboration to develop a shared vision and action plan for the child was the goal of Circles, but “all components of this collaboration must be understood as equally valuable - indeed, as equally essential” (Lerner & Castellino, 2002, p. 131). In this section we present data and some reflections on what it takes to achieve such balanced collaborative practice.

While it appears that Circles at times brought the worlds of home and school into closer alignment, at Site One especially, there were challenges at both the individual Circle level and organizational level. Although one might surmise that Site One would have had an advantage over Site Two since a strong partnership had already been established through Pathways to Prevention, it seems in most cases that the partnership did not easily translate into real collaboration. Interviews suggested that while there were strong relationships between individual community workers and participating school personnel at both sites, only one of the sites developed processes that facilitated seamless delivery of services at the school by the community workers, with community workers seen as part of the school and the school as part of a community of services. As one Circles worker at Site Two said, “*There is no [community agency] and there is no school - it is just us.*”

Four factors appear to have assisted the implementation of Circles. The first was supportive leadership. In this regard principals were vital if they saw the value of Circles, were willing to advocate for the programme, and to do something different. As one principal stated:

A lot of new initiatives that come into school meet resistance, there is a certain degree of scepticism because it could interrupt teaching time so part of my role is to filter out the things

that are not worth our time. But things like the Circles programme if I see them as adding value then I see my role is to assist staff in seeing that this will help kids.

A second key factor, which partly reflects school leadership, was a sense in some schools that they were ready for Circles and were already trying to achieve what it enabled them to do:

I think [school] is amazing in that the teachers are really open, so I think that they are really enjoying the Circles meetings to really get to know more and connect more with the parents, that is why Circles really works well there ... (Teachers) don't blame the parents ... they see it as a systems problem, they say there is something wrong with the system what can we do? ...

What the Circles meeting does is formalise that process and make it more of a habit (Interview – Teacher 9).

The universal praise from school personnel at one of the sites for the community workers as the 'right people,' was the third ingredient in successful implementation. When asked what made them the 'right people' comments such as they were 'respectful', 'they checked in with us', and 'they understand schools' were made. One teacher discussed how she saw the community workers and the teacher as part of the same team:

The Circles people that we have had have all been really great people and they have just fitted in so well, and they are people that teachers feel comfortable talking with. It has added more people within the school who have empathy for what we do (Interview – Teacher 9)

The community workers' ability to connect with teachers helped to generate a level of trust which in turn led to the fourth critical factor, the facilitation of collaborative processes.

As one principal explained:

I tried to make them feel part of the school, even though they are not at the school all the time ... So I want them to feel like they are another member of staff in some ways ... Naturally there is a level of trust involved but because of the nature of their roles I am happy to allow that,

especially given who they are I am confident they wouldn't misuse it. I have also given them time at staff meetings whenever they need it.

In addition to providing the community workers with a desk and the resources required to do their job while at school, processes were developed that ensured regular communication, shared planning, and decision making:

The initial referral meeting is where we [the school and Circles personnel] decide if Circles is appropriate for that child and then the Circles team is terrific in updating us. That has never been an issue with us thinking what is going on here, it has always been really good communications (Interview – Teacher 9).

Where implementation failure occurred most of these critical success factors were absent, or operated only intermittently. Reluctance on the part of both community agency and schools to change the way they did things was a fundamental challenge. For example, while community workers were part of the referral and strategic planning meetings at one site, opposition to including community workers in similar meetings was observed from both sides at the other site, where Circles was not typically seen as systems management by the community agency (and as a result not by parents and teachers) but as an extension of their family support programme, often being referred to as 'intensive case management'. Where Circles staff saw themselves as facilitators of a system of support, as demonstrated by the attendance of other community agencies at Circles meetings, the programme functioned more effectively.

School personnel often struggled as much as Circles workers with the new approach embodied in Circles, especially where there was a loss of leadership due to the transfer of a previously supportive principal. The support of a principal was, in turn, influenced both by their own values and by perceptions (at least in some cases) of how important mutually respectful community partnerships were to the Education Department and hence to their careers.

Communication barriers, as demonstrated by personnel sometimes not willing to talk to each other when difficulties occurred and failing to attend meetings designed to share information and plan across school and community services, further impeded the implementation of Circles. While at one site the process of referral was collaborative, with school and community agency discussing potential cases and appropriate referrals together, at the other site this process was fractured, with a school referring potential clients to the community agency who considered the referral, sometimes asking for further information. Thus the community agency alone decided if the referral was appropriate, with the clear inference that the role of schools was to cooperate with a programme owned and operated by the community agency. Techniques such as communication books, the sharing of meeting summaries, and regular contact between the Circles workers, parents and school personnel did help to improve overall communication where this was a problem.

Paradoxically, implementation problems experienced at Site One arose in part from the success of the Pathways to Prevention practice model. A key factor noted earlier was that the Pathways partnership, although on the whole very successful in improving both child and parent outcomes (Freiberg *et al.*, 2005), promoted a *cooperative* rather than a *collaborative* approach between schools and community agency (Keast *et al.*, 2007). A second consequence of working through an established model was that there was no freedom to implement Circles in new schools amenable to a collaborative approach. Thirdly, while the Pathways model has been very successful in reaching hard to reach families because it emphasises the use of workers from local ethnic communities (Homel *et al.*, 2006), some research suggests that professionally qualified staff may be better placed to implement complex programmes like Circles (Olds *et al.*, 2002). Certainly, due to the need to manage systems as opposed to the traditional case management approach of family support, pre-service and in-service training and coaching are vital (Fixsen *et al.*, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Researchers and practitioners have long emphasised that the ecology of child and youth development – or what is now generally referred to as ‘the developmental system’ - is “uniquely powerful in contributing to child and adolescent mental health outcomes” (Dishion & Stormshak, 2007, p. 18). According to Schein (1999), the extent to which members of a system are aligned determines how well the whole system functions. The health of the developmental system, measured by the strength of relations between levels of organization and the degree of harmony between developmental settings, therefore underpins positive child outcomes. Circles of Care was designed to enable creative solutions to “arise through a broader understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependencies of life” (Boyes-Watson, 2005, p. 369) and to enhance feedback from a range of contexts that in turn would assist individuals to “move beyond habits of blame towards habits of mutual responsibility.”

The qualitative research presented in this paper does suggest that at both sites parents, schools and Circles personnel were able to make adjustments to their practices, with benefits for the children particularly in relation to behaviour and school attendance. Thus, at the family level benefits were identified. These changes were founded on new relationships, especially across the school-family divide, and on an improved understanding of the child in their total environment. The sharing of historical and personal information, that often only parents or family members knew, was vital to ensuring that good decisions were made (Willumsen & Skivenes, 2005). For example, through Circles principals and teachers could see the wider ramifications for the child of a family member’s death. While parents bring to the process a different type of knowledge, this knowledge is limited and needs to be complemented by the expertise of teachers and professionals, resulting in better understanding and more informed decisions.

The main challenge that faced Circles was to create a true collaboration where all members (family, school and community) accepted each other as equal partners, working in unison and sharing responsibility for the whole child. However, as demonstrated in this study true collaborations are difficult to achieve (Huxham & Vangen, 2005), with the conditions that support the necessary partnerships not present within many child- and family-serving organizations (Keast *et al.*, 2007). While one site came closest, with school and community agency adjusting their approach to work in collaboration, this was only on a very small scale.

On reflection, it was always going to be a challenge to create organizational and cultural change by only implementing a programme at the level of practice. Effectively, we expected a programme to bring about the system changes that were a precondition for its own success. According to Fixsen *et al.* (2009) there is a need to align the administrative elements of each organisation (policies, procedures and structures) to enable effective delivery of a programme. In our case an example of this would be the Department of Education and Mission Australia building aspects of community, school and family collaboration into their expectations, training, resourcing and rewarding of staff. What we have learned is that without such systems alignment initiatives such as Circles are limited in how much change they can achieve and in terms of how sustainable any change can be.

Since collaborative practice is fundamental to sustained improvements in the lives of socially disadvantaged children, further research is required into the conditions that support systems alignment and into ways of preparing organizations for the changes needed. This work is a core component of the ongoing Pathways Project. Future research is also required to test the effects of Circles on standardised measures of children's wellbeing using rigorous quantitative methods incorporating such techniques as propensity matching to create a matched control group. This work is in progress, drawing on the Pathways longitudinal child database containing nearly 6000 records, and is supported by additional data collected via a

research tool called Journey Mapping, which allows qualitative data on a client's progress to be graphed using standardised methods and compared with the progress of other clients (Kibel, 1999).

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Figure 1. Simplified representation of the developmental systems model

Source: Adapted from Lerner & Castellino (2002).

Note: Only selected interactions between levels are depicted in the diagram.

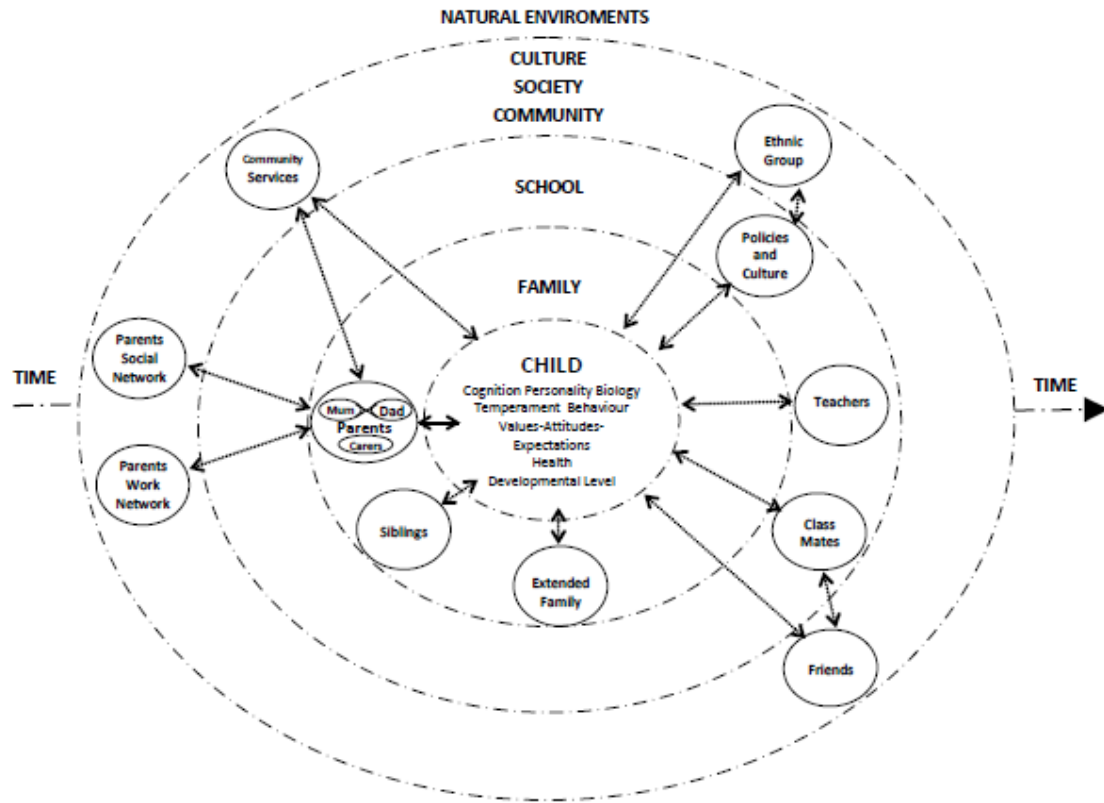


Figure 2. Emergent themes from interview and questionnaire data

