

Early Education

Volume 50 *Spring / Summer* 2011



Special issue: Professional Learning

- Remembering the COI programme •
- Transformational conversations •
- PD face to face, online and by the book •
- Early Childhood Taskforce •

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Front cover: *Who chooses the tools? And who makes the tools evident?* Getting ready to work at Samoa Taumafai A'oga Amata, Tokoroa.

Back cover: Using the tools to get on with the job together, dressed for action, persisting with difficulty, and asking for support. All part of meaningful collaborative learning for children and adults in a learning community.

Photo credit: Samoa Taumafai A'oga Amata, Tokoroa (For more about their story, see Lorraine Sands' article starting on p. 11).

Photos

Page 4 supplied by Tara Fagan

Page 16 supplied by Ruahine Kindergartens. Pictured: Deep discussion during a workshop held by Ruahine Kindergarten's Professional Services Manager team are provisionally registered teacher, Jill Brider and her mentor teacher, Leanne Walls from Kelvin Grove kindergarten in Palmerston North. During this session Jill was also able to share with others how she has developed an e-portfolio for her two year registration. No more carrying around heavy folders of work!

Page 23: supplied by Ruahine Kindergartens. Pictured: Nicola Billman, Mel Kenzie, Lynda Hunt, Natalie Cook (critical friend) and Sylvie Ker display great concentration as they build on their ICT knowledge as part of their commitment to disseminate their research to the local community, the Ruahine Kindergartens Board and the wider education community.

Page 31: supplied by Michael Mintrom.

Contributions

Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community. Please keep copies of any contributions as we cannot guarantee to return what is sent.

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Early Education Special Issue: Spring/Summer 2012

'Professionalism in early childhood education'

Guest Editor: Carmen Dalli

Call for papers: Early Education welcomes research articles and reflections on 'professionalism' especially in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Abstracts of 300 words (maximum) to Guest Editor by 28 February 2012

Notification of abstract selection: 10 March 2012

Full paper by 1 August 2012

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For more information contact the Guest Editor, Carmen Dalli (carmen.dalli@vuw.ac.nz), or the Editors, Sue Stover (sue.stover@aut.ac.nz) and Claire McLachlan (c.j.mclachlan@massey.ac.nz).

Professional learning

Change and complexity

Ann Hatherly

The great teachers believe in the growth of the intellect and talent, and they are fascinated with the process of learning

(Dweck, 2006, p. 194)

When it comes to thinking about professional learning and development in 2011, there are two things we can be certain of. Firstly, more than ever before, teaching – and indeed the world – is defined by change and complexity; this means that ongoing professional learning has become imperative. Secondly, professional learning itself is more diverse and challenging than ever before but also in many ways more rewarding.

I remember a time in the early 1990s when in response to a flyer I had drafted, a colleague remarked that I should change the term ‘professional development’ to ‘in-service courses’ because teachers wouldn’t understand what I was talking about. This comment reflected far more than a debate about wording. It was indicative of an evolving paradigm shift regarding what makes effective ‘on the job’ learning, accelerated by the spread of socio-cultural theories. Courses delivering skills-only, ‘off-the-shelf’ content were no longer considered that effective in changing teacher practice except perhaps where the subject matter dealt with compliance issues that needed to be standardised across contexts. To meet the increasingly complex demands of everyday teaching, a more flexible approach to professional learning was being called for, one that valued prior knowledge and experience, took account of context and was dynamic rather than prescribed.

In the last few years, I have been fortunate to be coached by two outstanding facilitators in adult learning, Joan Dalton and David Anderson. In Joan’s e-book *Learning Talk: Build understandings*, she explains this same paradigm shift as moving from the ‘world of fixity’ to the ‘world of possibility’. In the fixity world, knowledge is a thing to be acquired; there is an expectation that there is a ‘right’ way and a ‘wrong’ way that is decided by others with more ‘authority’ (often attributed to PD facilitators, academics or ERO) and learning rests with the individual. In contrast, in the world of possibility, knowledge is a resource developed through relationships and dialogue with others. It is tentative, relational and values what Joan Dalton refers to as ‘both and’ thinking and contrasts with ‘either or’ thinking. It asks of us (participants and facilitators) to be fervently curious, courageous and to create our own knowledge rather than be told.

Unfortunately, the ‘world of fixity’ is still very prevalent

in much of our teacher professional development. It is frequently seen in the expectation that complex topics can be ‘delivered’ in a three-hour course or that ERO recommendations can be ‘fixed’ by a staff workshop or two. It is also evident in budgets that cover the course costs for attendees but not any substantial, planned, follow-up activity or engagement for the wider team, so the value of attendance is lost.

Thankfully, there are also centres that work very much in the world of possibility. These centres tend to be ones where leaders do more than manage the centre and staff well. They pay conscious attention to building a foundation of professional trust and hold high expectations for every staff member to be a learner and a contributor. From these teaching teams I learn as much as I give. Their collective passion is contagious and constructive – it leads to deep change – and I can leave after a session with them believing that I have the best job in the world! For these teams, professional learning and development is not so much a scheduled event, it is part of daily life and all the moments in which they are teaching.

What of the facilitator’s role in the possibility world where subject knowledge is no longer king as in the fixity world? I would be the last to say that having current subject knowledge does not matter. However working with skilled facilitators like Joan Dalton and David Anderson and also reading the likes of Isaura Barrera and Robert M. Corso, (*Skilled Dialogue: Strategies for responding to cultural diversity in early childhood*), I have come to believe that skills in intentional listening and conversation, such as paraphrasing, testing assumptions and exploring perspectives, are a facilitator’s most precious and useful tools of trade. This is because, to be of any substance in these politically turbulent times, professional learning and change inevitably involves teachers confronting and adjusting often deeply held values and beliefs. The facilitation strategies required for this level of learning conversations are not ones that are prevalent in our everyday interactions; they have to be learnt and practised over time.

As we move through the second decade of the 21st century, I see another important paradigm shift happening in professional learning and development for early childhood teachers. Digital technologies have now got to the point in their evolution where they are beginning to offer some real options in terms of virtual facilitation and high quality online resources, which centres can access. There are platforms that offer interactive webinars where presentations can be uploaded by a facilitator and discussed by a group

of participants and there are now several options for video and audio conferencing, some of which like Skype™ and Google+™ cost nothing to download. These can be used as part of a longer programme as happened recently when a professional learning cluster in Christchurch was able to Skype a team in the North Island to 'pick their brains' about primary care-giving and transitions. Alternatively, they may be used as the preferred medium for an entire programme. In another example, a remote, rural centre in Southland is holding several video conferencing sessions with a specialist facilitator in the North Island and so saving on the substantial time and cost of travel.

While I believe face-to-face professional learning will always be an important part of the mix, virtual options offer huge promise for several reasons. The increasing cost of fuel and erratic weather patterns mean that travel for both facilitators and teachers is becoming a less attractive and reliable option, particularly for those in rural areas. In terms of where and who we draw our professional learning and development from, virtual opportunities are affording increased flexibility. We need no longer be restricted to local, even national connections. There are growing numbers of teachers on Twitter™ who are getting linked to people, research and resources worldwide, as part of their professional learning. Currently I subscribe, for free, to a social networking site for educators (www.futureofeducation.com) that provides live webinars with guest presenters who have included Ken Robinson and Howard Gardner. The fact that the time difference means that many of these are live when I could be asleep is not necessarily inconvenient because they are all recorded and I can listen 'any time, any place'. This is one of the advantages of virtual learning. Sites like this are growing by the day.

My enthusiasm for the potential benefits of virtual options does, however, come with a caveat. Whether face-to-face or virtual, the quality of facilitation plays a key role in success. The principles of 'good' facilitation such as participant interaction and engagement remain the same whatever the context; however, the facilitation strategies needed to achieve these do not necessarily transfer readily from face-to-face to online environments. I believe that new knowledge and practice is required to facilitate successfully in a virtual world.

It is true to say that the potential value of virtual networks and resources to contribute to professional learning is yet to be realised by the early childhood sector. The belief that 'real' professional learning requires face-to-face interaction with a person or people in the same room at all times is still prevalent in both strategic planning and execution. I believe



Although online professional learning opportunities are growing, face-to-face meetings are still needed. Pictured here deep in conversation are Annika Fry and Tara Fagan, who also used blogging as part of Annika's teacher registration process. (For the story of how Annika was mentored, see page 19.)

this attitude needs to and will change as ICT capability and access grow, and teachers and professional learning facilitators transfer their familiarity with social networking platforms such as Skype video from their private lives to using these professionally.

In their various ways, the stories, commentary and research you will find in this issue illustrate and celebrate aspects of either one or both the paradigm shifts I have discussed. I have deliberately commissioned and selected articles from practising teachers, academics and those who work in the field of professional development because I believe each of these groups has an important contribution to make to the debate. As a collection, the articles offer readers multiple perspectives on what counts as effective professional learning practice. Above all else, it is my hope that this volume helps to inspire leaders and teachers with a new appreciation for innovative, useful and practical professional learning and development.

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Letter from Singapore

Jennie Whiley

I have been fortunate to enjoy a long and interesting career working within the early childhood sector in New Zealand and am now broadening my experience in Singapore. When I qualified as a kindergarten teacher in the late 1970s, the world of teaching looked significantly different than it does today. Over the past 30 years with the introduction of theorists and philosophical approaches such as Vygotsky and Reggio Emilia and the introduction of a national curriculum, approaches to teaching practice in New Zealand have developed from the 'theme and subject-based approach' in which I was trained to the more appropriate child-centred approach of today.

I have had the privilege of working with some amazing mentors and role-models and attending inspiring professional development opportunities that have shaped my professional philosophy to what it is today - strongly based on a child-centred approach that respects children as sophisticated thinkers and learners.

After teaching for 15+ years as a teacher and senior teacher, my career moved to a more leadership focus through my roles as lecturer and professional development facilitator, allowing me to share my experience and knowledge with others and support them to provide quality learning experiences for the children with whom they work. Before coming to Singapore, my last position in Auckland was as Team Leader within the Ministry of Education which provided me with the opportunity to marry quality education provision with regulatory requirements to provide the optimum outcomes for children, particularly through the development and implementation of the revised regulatory requirements. I found this a very rewarding and challenging experience that helped cement my philosophical and pedagogical beliefs.

Having briefly lived in Singapore previously, my husband and I were keen to return and working in the early childhood sector overseas has long been an interest of mine, so after I successfully gained a position, we left New Zealand three years ago to embark on this new adventure.

Stepping into the first childcare centre here was a bit like stepping back in time. Many private childcare centres still operate very teacher-directed, timetable-structured programmes, with little focus on children learning through play. Additionally, kindergartens and childcare centres are licensed under different Ministries, with kindergartens governed by the Ministry of Education and childcare centres

under the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sport (much like New Zealand pre-1990). Fortunately, I currently work in a private international childcare school that has based its curriculum on recognised and proven curricula from around the world, including *Te Whāriki* and Reggio Emilia and I was specifically employed to implement a play-based approach in which to deliver this curriculum.

The regulatory requirements for childcare centres are similar to those in New Zealand with some interesting exceptions. Children do not start school in Singapore until their seventh birthday so childcare services cater for children from 18 months to 7 years and infant care services for children from two to 18 months. All childcare centres must operate from "no later than 7am" to "no earlier than 7pm" Monday to Friday, and "no later than 7am" to "no earlier than 2:00pm" on Saturdays. Within these hours, services can provide "Full Day Care, Half Day Care or Flexible Childcare" programmes. Childcare services must "be open throughout the year except on Sundays and gazetted public holidays." They may "observe half-days on the eve of Christmas, New Year and Chinese New Year" and "close for another 5½ days in a year, of which 2½ days should be used for staff training." At all other times of the year they must be open for all hours stated in the regulations!

Currently, services must employ a Supervisor who is qualified at the Diploma of Teaching level and holds the 'Diploma in Preschool Education Leadership', a Singapore-specific qualification. In addition, services must also have at least one teacher with a Diploma of Teaching and two with a Certificate of Preschool Education. By 2013, 75% of all teachers must hold the Diploma of Teaching qualification. The required Staff-Child ratios are:

2 months - 18 months	1:5
Above 18 months - 30 months	1:8
Above 30 months - 3 years	1:12
Above 3 years - 4 years	1:15
Above 4 years - below 7 years	1:25

The following regulation is one that I found most interesting on my introduction to early childhood education in Singapore and a good example of different cultural values towards young children's learning:

"Every child care centre shall have access to outdoor play space. The outdoor playground must be within walking distance from the child care centre, i.e. the children should not cross any vehicular roads to reach the playground. For playgrounds located on different levels, staircases must not be more than 2 flights of steps (maximum 10 steps each), i.e. children should climb no more than 20 steps to reach the playground."

Where outdoor playground is not possible, there shall be additional indoor gross motor activity area. The space provided both indoors and outdoors, shall be at least 30m² or one-fifth of the centre's capacity at 5 m² per child, whichever is more. The gross motor activity area shall exclude service areas and children's activity areas."

(Child Care Division, Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, 2011, p. 4)

In New Zealand, we view physical development as a crucial element in children's holistic learning and the regulations reflect this with the requirement of an outdoor learning space in all early childhood services. In Singapore however, parents, and indeed some children, do not like spending time outdoors and do not appreciate the learning that occurs in outdoor play. It has taken me two years of strong advocacy to get approval and funding to develop an outdoor learning environment for our preschool.

Many services in Singapore have their own in-house professional development programmes and there appears to be little communication between services. However, there are two main community organizations that provide professional development opportunities for early childhood teachers, The Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore), AECES and the 'Professional Chapter' of the Education Services Union, ESU. Both services offer workshops and seminars throughout the year and AECES also offer mentorship for teachers, undertake research and oversee all practicum supervision for the University of Melbourne's Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies (International) Programme.

EtonHouse, where I teach, operates 52 schools spread across Singapore, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Within the organisation, we are fortunate to have the 'EtonHouse Education Centre' (EEC), training and professional development centre for both EtonHouse staff and the wider early childhood community. The EEC also works in collaboration with Roehampton University in London to offer both Bachelor's and Masters level courses.

Working alongside colleagues from different countries also provides me with daily professional development. Hearing their perspectives about learning and teaching through their varied experiences provides a different lens from which to reflect on my own teaching and results in a dynamic teaching environment. Certainly, working in a different cultural context is a learning experience on its own!

Reflecting back on my Singapore experience, I believe



Jennie Whiley reports that it has taken two years of strong advocacy to get approval and funding to develop an outdoor learning environment in the Singapore preschool where she works.

Here, a ladder is set up on the ground for children to practice their balancing skills.

my strong pedagogical beliefs and knowledge of early childhood educational theory has assisted me to advocate quality practice to both management and parents. In Asian countries in particular, there is still a strong focus on academic achievement even for children as young as two years old, and a belief that this can only be taught through formal teaching. Through confidently discussing current theories with parents and management personnel and demonstrating children's learning through quality documentation, I have been able to advocate for and demonstrate the value of, and gain support for, a child-centred approach for the children in our preschool.

Having not taught for over 15 years, I approached my move back into the classroom with both excitement and trepidation but have found it to be as rewarding an experience as it was when I was a young teacher. However, my approach is significantly different. Embracing the philosophies of Reggio Emilia, I believe I am much more sensitive and responsive than as a young teacher. I am more skilled at analysing children's experiences against learning goals and fanatical about making children learning visible through documentation and display.

Working with young children again has cemented my beliefs about appropriate practice and provided me with inspiration every day. Valuing children as competent, capable and active learners and providing them opportunities to explore and investigate allows us to appreciate them as sophisticated thinkers who are naturally curious and able to manage their own learning. It is truly a privilege and enormous responsibility to be part of a young child's learning journey.

Reference:

Child Care Division, Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (Singapore). (2011). Guide to setting up a child care centre. Available from http://www.childcarelink.gov.sg/ccls/uploads/CCC_Guide.pdf

Centres of Innovation

Gaining a new understanding of reality

Anne Meade

*Because we have listened
because we are willing
to let go of the little world
we have made for ourselves
because we gained a new
understanding of reality,
we have become persons in a new way.*

*Our response
to the word addressed to us
helps us make us who we are.*

(poet unnamed, 'Sometimes Dialogue'; included in Gilling, 1999, pp. 83–84)

These lines of poetry seem particularly appropriate for this special edition of *Early Education* because dialogue in professional development is intended to 'help us make us who we are' (my emphasis).

In this article, I want to reflect on the action research model practised by Centres of Innovation (COI) in New Zealand from 2003 to 2009 and what it meant for the designated centres that emerged from their 'little worlds' and 'became persons in a new way'. Their new identity involved broadening their networks, and their activities soon had meaning for, and were valued by, a very wide range of early educators at home and abroad. They exercised educational leadership for the benefit of the early childhood sector.

How did early childhood teachers gain 'a new understanding of reality' through the COI programme? My short answer is: through dialogue, educational leadership, research, and further dialogue.

The COI Programme

The Centres of Innovation programme was announced as part of the New Zealand Government's 10-year plan for early childhood education policy and was part of the strategy to "establish and reflect on quality practices in teaching and learning" (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 15). The words simply said:

- Establish six Centres of Innovation on a three-year cycle to showcase excellence and innovation in ECE (p. 15).

The policy announcement described the COIs as "developing and distributing quality practices". A sidebar mentioned COI fostering research and development (p. 15).

The COI programme had a dual agenda:

- sharing knowledge of innovation and diversity of practice to promote teacher reflection on quality practices; and
- researching the innovative practice to generate additional knowledge.

In the 10-year plan for ECE, a section headed 'A vision for shared innovation in 2012' includes the words: 'the regular change in the research cycle allows the exploration, documentation and sharing of diverse range of skills and practices that continues to extend the effectiveness of teaching and learning' (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 15). In their evaluation of the COI programme, Gibbs and Poskitt (2009) described the activity of the programme as "professional learning within a culture of inquiry" (p. 71).

According to the first COI programme publication, the aims were to:

- Build the use of innovative approaches that result in improved early childhood teaching and learning based on *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996);
- Facilitate action research, with the help of researchers, to show the results the innovative approaches have on learning and teaching; and
- Share the knowledge, understanding and models of practice with others in the early childhood sector and parents/ whānau (Meade, 2005, back cover).

As recommended by the Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education Working Group (2001), the COI programme adopted action research as its research approach. Teachers researching their practice are very important for positive child outcomes, for effective early childhood education, according to the Best Evidence Synthesis on professional development in early childhood education (Mitchell & Cubey, 2003). Teachers in designated COI were to combine their skills with the complementary skills of researchers.

The COI programme ran in three-year 'rounds' beginning in 2003. Before it was disestablished in 2009, the COI programme had included 20 ECE services with 16 completing their full 'round' and projects.

Officials in the curriculum division of the Ministry of

Education managed the programme. Before each round, some gaps in ECE research were identified (with some input from ECE sector leaders). The Ministry's call for applications specified the content ('focus') area to be addressed by the forthcoming round of COI projects.

Applications came from ECE services and these services were invited to name a preferred research associate from the academy in their expression of interest. Shortlisted services were asked to develop a research proposal as part of their full application with support from their potential research associate. This was the start of the partnership between practitioner researchers and academic researchers. The partners were required to develop a relationship agreement during their first months together. In outlining their intended ways of working, *inter alia*, the agreement stated their dissemination plans and authorship arrangement. The dissemination expectations made it very clear that COI were to engage in research with the support of experienced researchers in order to create new knowledge and they were to share their knowledge. They were to 'let go of their little world' (in the words of the poem about dialogue). COI would not simply engage in self-study or self-review.

The research associate always guided the ethics application through their institution. Once ethics approval was achieved, typically the research associates provided some research methods workshops, and gave considerable guidance and support through all steps of the first action research cycle. By the second cycle, practitioner-researchers were more competent and confident in gathering data and analysing the information. Sometimes, however, different practitioners took up research roles in later cycles, and the research associates needed to work alongside them to increase their research capability. Research associates often also provided 'scaffolding' in relation to public speaking, including preparing PowerPoint™ slides. Face to face dissemination at conferences was usually carried out jointly by the partners, although a trend emerged where each practitioner-research team ran an increasing number of workshops for their peers without their research associate. They also usually looked after visitors who came to see their innovative practice *in situ* without the research associate being present.

As well as each practitioner-academic partnership, there was another collaborative structure in the COI programme; all the practitioner and academic researchers in each round came together twice annually for a residential hui (workshop). At these hui, content knowledge applicable for the teaching and learning research topics, knowledge about researching teaching and learning, and knowledge about dissemination practices (public speaking and writing) was shared.

A Research Leader was appointed for the COI programme. I held that position for more than six of the programme's seven years. The role was to organise the residential hui, give advice and guidance to applicants and contracted COI, link projects with common interests, manage quality control processes, assist with ethics applications when necessary, compile a publication series (the "Waves" series), and edit final reports. I maintained an overview of the programme.

Some COI papers and most final reports have been published on the Ministry of Education's 'Education Counts' website but books are being developed from the final reports of two COIs; namely Greerton Early Childhood Centre and Mangere Bridge Kindergarten.

Why share knowledge of innovation and diversity of practice?

Innovation takes organisations forward through reflection, thinking 'outside the square', and making choices that differ from typical services. It entails discussion amongst stakeholders about what, how and why, and a collective capacity for uncertainty. It requires leadership in articulating the features of the innovation and to guide its implementation.

In 2005, I talked about the nature of the COI research (Meade, 2005). The focus of most COI research was 'process quality' connected to innovative teaching and learning. By this century there was a sizeable amount of early childhood research that identified the structural variables that make a difference for child outcomes, such as teacher qualifications, ratio, professional development, and teacher pay and conditions (see, for example, the Competent Children, Competent Learners longitudinal study reports by Cathy Wylie and other authors, 2004 and 2007). Needed was more knowledge – evidence-based and theoretical – about teaching practices, about the nature of adult and child interactions that impact on learning. COI were to create more knowledge about effective pedagogy. A benefit of COI research was that their unique innovative features stimulated professional 'wondering' amongst audiences, and provoked some to make changes to improve learning outcomes in their own settings.

"Studies of effective early childhood education practice say that the processes of articulation of, investigation into, and reflection about practice are important factors" (Mitchell & Cubey, 2003; Moyles, Adams, & Musgrove, 2002, cited in Meade, 2005, p. 4). Teachers said in their evaluation forms after COI workshops or visits, and to the COI programme evaluators (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2009), that they were 'inspired by COI' who provided role-models for these processes. The COI programme was designed to enhance these processes; for example, through the selection emphasising innovation, the partnerships with academic researchers, the requirements to disseminate early, and the COI Programme hui.

No COI team wanted to go out and say, 'Copy me; do it my way'; they knew that contexts are too diverse. As well, centres' curricula are very different. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is a curriculum framework and allows – indeed invites – diversity of practice to fulfil the aspirations of each community associated with each early childhood setting. It invites singular and different curricula being developed to suit different communities, albeit within the 'whāriki' framework. This demands high-level professional judgment and practice. About the time early childhood teachers become qualified and registered, they understand that centres have to create a curriculum for their community. Hence, many early childhood teachers asked about COI *processes* to do with

developing 'Know why' as well as 'Know how'.

On the one hand, teachers were keen to talk to COI practitioner-researchers about the connection between their innovation and *Te Whāriki*; for example, they asked questions about how Wilton Playcentre educators integrated schema learning with the dispositional learning that is so central to *Te Whāriki*. In another example, teachers from junior classes wanted to learn more from Mangere Bridge Kindergarten teachers about how to facilitate the competencies described in the recent *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) by building on children's kindergarten learning based on the strands in *Te Whāriki*. On the other hand, COI practitioner-researchers increasingly enjoyed leading workshops as they recognised the value of "thinking beside others" (Moss, 2001, p. 128) with teaching-team members, the families and their community, the research associates, COI hui attendees and audiences. Their engagement with audiences provided powerful reciprocal learning experiences.

Before the COI produced any research results, first-round COI became magnets for visitors and their teachers were asked to speak at conferences and workshops. They spoke passionately about their unique practice. COI generated 'waves'. Although COI could begin to explain the 'why' about their practice, many found that they needed to do more theorising about their practice. Once they became more articulate their 'waves' became a powerful means for disseminating ideas. The practitioner-researchers also shifted attitudes about educational research. It seemed to me that teachers in the sector felt COI were doing the research *for* them, not *about* them.

Why action research?

Glenda MacNaughton, Sharne Rolf and Iram Siraj-Blatchford (2001) see research as a tool to answer "questions that would remain unanswered were it not for the willingness of practitioners and academics alike to engage in the research process. Research is about discovery. Research creates knowledge" (p. 3). Like a detective, the researcher searches for clues that:

... advance theories about how and why things happen and start their work with questions about something intriguing, mysterious or puzzling. They then use well-tested methods to gather the clues and information needed to help them 'solve', understand or explain their intrigue, mystery or puzzle (p. 12).

The action research model adopted by COI started with questions that intrigued the practitioners in centres designated as COI. The educators were asked to frame their question/s with an audience in mind wider than their own centre; to bear in mind what others who were interested in their innovation could be puzzled about. An important aim was to help those involved in early childhood education to better understand the COI's innovative practice.

Fortuitously, Yoland Wadsworth from the Action Research Issues Association in Melbourne came to Wellington in 2003 to run a workshop. I asked if a practitioner-researcher from each of the inaugural COI could attend the workshop as an

observer. I attended too. That workshop, and Wadsworth's book, *Everyday evaluation on the run* (1991), were strong formative influences on the 'pioneers' of the COI programme. COI participants liked Wadsworth's advice about starting by observing "current actions-in-the-world" in their settings, and developing a "curious question". Those observations were to incorporate reflections on *what* was going well/ not going well. The question that followed was, *why*?

Yoland Wadsworth describes the objectives of action research as ranging from meeting the needs of those in crisis through to strengthening positive conditions and "promoting those conditions elsewhere" (1991, p. 33). The latter objectives matched the aims for the COI programme, and the motives of the COI practitioner-researchers. They were not in a crisis. However, they did have some curious questions to research, and were motivated to investigate what was going well in their innovative practice and why.

Thus, no COI research project started with a crisis or even a problem to solve. They wanted to research their innovative practice to generate *additional* knowledge for the e.c.e. sector and to disseminate that knowledge with the aim of promoting the positive conditions elsewhere.

The model was teacher action research, not academic research; the unpublished guidelines for COI said the practitioner-researchers were to be in the 'driving seat'. The contracts between COI and the Ministry had dissemination to the education sector as significant requirement, and the resources provided meant the research had to be better planned, and more systematic and intentional than self-studies or self-reviews designed for internal audiences. To satisfy the quality research requirements, the Ministry funded research advice and support from more expert researchers.

Accelerated professional learning

The features and processes of the COI programme accelerated the practitioner-researchers' professional learning and professional behaviour by jumps. The strongest indication of this acceleration was their dissemination at conferences. Most people associated with the programme, myself included, were surprised to find practitioner-researchers being invited to be keynote speakers at conferences in New Zealand and overseas; about one-third of COI accepted such invitations and delivered keynote speeches. Generally at least one practitioner-researcher delivered the speech with a research associate. The early childhood teacher's identity was transformed. Moreover, the character of early education conferences changed. Commentators were astonished about this acceleration into top-spots, because keynote speakers typically have higher-degree credentials; doing doctorate research is the usual 'apprenticeship' in the academy before delivering keynote addresses. However, COI practitioner-researchers arrived on the conference scene with some of the same skills, newly acquired, and no higher degree. A new criterion had been created: being a reflective teacher-researcher.

I noticed that the interactions between them and their audience felt qualitatively different. COI speakers were

passionate and they personalised the knowledge. It was authentic in the eyes of practitioners who listened closely and asked insightful questions:

Early childhood teachers can relate to COI teacher-researchers who share their projects. Moreover, COI presenters invite dialogue because of who they are. Teachers don't feel shy about teacher-researchers grappling with authentic questions, whereas they can feel inhibited about engaging in conversations with university teachers (Meade, 2009, p. 4).

How did COI experiences produce reflective teacher-researchers who jumped to giving plenary addresses to conferences – in New Zealand, Australia, Samoa, and England – and to writing books? Any explanation has to consider the roles of the research associates including building research capability and being a critical friend. I have said on other occasions that they were essential to the success of the programme and COI participants. Research associates promoted robust research and sound evidence:

Without them, much of the work would never be published, and the majority of the dissemination would be ephemeral The relationship contributes to transformational professional learning professional learning amongst members of the COI teaching team. It also contributes to real-world learning for the academics. ...

The length of time the partners work together is significant. Two years gathering data, and one year analysing and writing it up, has been important for deep learning. ... In the final year, insights sink home; practice is theorised, and the actions emanating from the research ripple out into the sector (Meade, 2009, p. 4).

Practitioner transformation in the COI programme happened because of dissemination factors as well as research factors. The dissemination factors included:

- the 'walls coming down' whereby the practice is opened to the scrutiny of peers and families;
- oral presentations adding to accountability, and audience questions assisted practitioners to improve articulation of their practice;
- sharing of ideas through talks and writing building solidarity in the sector;
- writing which created new models of knowledge for teaching; writing links theory and action;
- publication which took the research out to the wider world and academic gaze (Meade, 2009).

Looking from the 'outside' at the COI programme, Gibbs and Poskitt (2009) concluded that:

There were many good outcomes for teachers including opportunities to engage in critical thinking that challenged their previously held assumptions about teaching and learning. As a result of their collaborative professional learning and initiatives, many teachers reported that they were now engaging in better quality

planning, formative assessment processes and increased use of ICT within the learning and teaching programme (p. 8).

Practitioner-researchers and those they engaged with – through meaningful dialogue in collaborative professional learning – gained new understandings of reality.

*We have become persons in a new way.
Our response
to the word addressed to us
helps us make us who we are.*

The agency rests with 'us', not a third person. This is the power of action research; it entails dialogue and, usually, the participants letting go and becoming persons 'in a new way'.

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Forging a path forward

A palagi facilitator, a Samoan centre

Lorraine Sands

Suppose that the idea of 'the effective learner' can be unpacked into a number of learning attributes: tendencies towards 'persisting', 'questioning', 'collaborating' and so on. What is at stake here is how we can take a dynamic approach to such qualities; charting their potential or possible direction of growth, and therefore providing some guidance about what we do that strengthens or weakens them. (Claxton & Carr, 2004, p. 88).

I wanted to tell this story about the teachers at Samoa Taumafai A'oga Amata because it matters to me. It is essentially a story about women who care deeply, who love strongly, and who want to make a difference for their children's learning that takes them into life as successful learners in this 21st century world.

They have another love and that is their Samoan culture. They want their children and families to experience this, inside their regional Waikato township of Tokoroa, seemingly eons away from the traditions that clasp their hearts and breathe life into the way they live, teach and learn. These are courageous women and I have loved them for that; me, a palagi with virtually no knowledge of this culture they hold so dear and no experience of working in a Samoan setting.

At the beginning I knew I was on shaky ground and my only hope was to be a learner alongside them and together, somehow forge a pathway forward. So this is a story too about how we have travelled together as companions, listening and learning from each other.

This learning together started with a first meeting just before Christmas as a way to introduce ourselves, with the intent of beginning work in earnest at the start of the new year. As many centres know when the Educational Review Office writes a report with compliances, the Ministry of Education can and does take the dramatic step of putting a centre on a provisional license. This is what had happened to the teachers at Samoa Taumafai A'oga Amata. It is not an easy situation to be in and we explain this right at the beginning, with the agreement of Loretta, Vise, Fili, Siolo, Glenys, Melanie and Lee to provide a sense of the progress that these teachers made. We want to link this too, to the quote at the beginning from Margaret Carr and Guy

Claxton (2004) so that we do indeed chart their potential, understand their growth and realise their commitment to being effective learners as they strengthened their tendencies to persist, to question and to collaborate.

From here on, we will concentrate on credit-based learning which is how facilitators work as part of Educational Leadership Project (ELP). We know this works in wise, vibrant settings for children and we think these principles are principles for learning across life's spectrum and therefore are equally important for adults' learning. We have *Tē Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) to thank for these insights. Our national curriculum is the one uniting framework that links the characteristically diverse array of early childhood settings in New Zealand. We celebrate this diversity because we hope this means that families and children find settings that connect with their language, identity and culture.

Wherever we work, we are looking for the magic that ignites teachers' passion (Lee, 2011) and drives the dreams they dream for learning within their communities. This is where we start because here is the motivational powerhouse that lifts teachers from the daily effort to 'get the jobs done' to their pedagogical, philosophical vision for learning. If we are focused on the programme, the routines and the rules we can end up narrowing our vision and our practice and therefore lessen the vibrancy, the meaning, the joy for children's learning opportunities. So we begin by asking teachers to decide on a research question as a vehicle to take them forward in open enquiry as they explore what is most important to them.

This was Samoa Taumafai A'oga Amata's research question:

In what ways can our documentation support children to grow their ideas further, so they deepen and widen their explorations, and continuity and complexity of children's learning is supported?

This was a big question that would go to the heart of learning and teaching at Samoa Taumafai, enabling teachers to articulate with confidence, thoughtfulness and passion the dispositions and skills that their children were growing.

The reason for choosing to look at their documentation stemmed from the value that that documentation provides as a way to have conversations around practice, based on learning in context. This kind of thoughtful narrative account of children's learning was intended to drive learning opportunities and provide the data to track progress.

Russell Bishop and Ted Glynn (1999) have an interesting view on the way teachers' intentions and children's intentions might play out in this kind of responsive pedagogical dialogue requiring: "the teacher to be attentive to the variety of explanations learners will create, be silent, wait and not swamp conversation...." (p. 189).

This makes Learning Story narrative assessments more than an assessment technique. Thoughtful analysis flows through into teaching and learning practice and becomes a pedagogical approach that sees intentional teachers actively building a relationship-based community of learners.

For Fili, Learning Stories had become "more alive for the reader", she told me. She makes evident children's dispositions now through her writing, but also through thoughtful use of ICT. I watched her confidently use 'Comic life' software which allows for easy formatting of photos. "It helps me a lot," she said. "When you compare the work before and this time - it looks so much more amazing.... as well as the language that we're using."

As a professional development facilitator, my job, I felt, was to ease teachers' concern and support them to grow their own abilities. To do this I spent a good part of my first day playing. It's true, it's a great job. We get to play and we do this because we think that being involved in children's learning is such a legitimate way to connect with that learning. This is how ELP facilitators are able to write about and analyse this learning with a view to widening and deepening possibilities. There is nothing more certain to grab teachers' attention than to write about the fabulous learning happening in their own context. This kind of modeling offers a fresh perspective. We then listen as teachers speak about learning that has excited them and we support them to write in dispositional ways. Through conversation we analyse this learning, all the while using a narrative style so we ensure that we stay connected to families and children.

Essentially we want to draw families into their children's learning journey because they are their children's long term advocates. Together we consider how teachers might support children to practice their skills and deepen the habits of mind that are the hallmark of good learners (Dweck, 2006). This is individualised planning for learning and teaching in a way that families can build on too, making the connections between home and centre very strong.

And so we continued. I played and listened and discovered a passionate little guy called Bronson who loved monster trucks. He had gone to extraordinary lengths to get teachers' attention about these and so I wrote about the many dispositions he employed to expand his knowledge and communicate his ideas. As teachers listened to my

thoughts, we began to wonder what further provocations we could offer. The teachers took up this challenge and we were away. Meanwhile we were building our relationship and most importantly trusting and respecting one another. Everywhere I looked *mafutaga* (*manaakitanga*; hospitality) was evident and as the teachers helped me muddle my way through their cultural perspectives, because I wanted to learn, I was so grateful for the way they kindly supported my slow journey. I was finding effort and practice hard work.

They, by comparison with me, caught on to the notion that Learning Stories are not difficult academic constructs. They are all about a common sense approach to understanding learning. They began to see there was no point writing assessments that did not connect with families when learning was disguised in jargon, developmental language. They realised that *A'iga* (families) want to recognise their child in our writing and they want to laugh and be proud of their children's achievements. There is no sense at all in writing group stories when *A'iga* find it hard to see how this relates to them. We worked on these and then wrote an individual analysis. This was a way to let families know what was happening in the community but personalised for their child.

In a conversation with Vise, I learnt just how important this had become:

Vise: I see the clear picture of who I am as a teacher and the learning that's inside that drives me to be determined to be able to get deep into the children's learning and to find out more about each child It makes me think that each child has their own unique way of learning, and for us to foster that learning, the child will grow up to become a competent learner and the same with their interests ... that's something that I'm passionate about with the children ... coming into a loving environment and to know that when their parents walk in, the children are learning a lot during the day ... and taking their portfolios home which is marvelous for me as a teacher to see parents asking for their portfolios. And having parents' night, it's quite a good turnout now. And sitting with them and talking about the children's learning, it's so exciting to hear them saying, you've gone a long way and now look at it. And those parents love to write down their voice....

We put effort into making Learning Stories flow more like narratives that would connect with the child and family and we changed the bullet point analysis and 'what next?' into a narrative too. We shifted the writing style from an observer or objective point of view into a personal account. Instead of observer we wrote *faiaoga* (teacher) to make this very clear. As we couldn't see all the learning because most of it, like an iceberg, is underneath the water, inside heads and hearts, we kept the analysis tentative and formative. We made sure we all contributed because *Tē Whāriki* is a socio-cultural document and gets its validity from multiple perspectives. In fact, it is only valid when everyone contributes, so *faiaoga* moved away from being responsible for particular children's learning and wrote about learning

that excited them, whoever the child was.

The monthly bar graph chart with each child's name on the wall was a management technique that kept everyone aware of who had stories written for them so that equity was assured. When I asked the teachers what they thought, this is what they told me:

Loretta: It's about learning and it is also about listening. I could see a big change with how we engage in children's investigations and exploration within their learning and also our attitudes towards how we respond ... working together as a team is really important ... sharing our ideas.. listening to other people's views and how they see things as well it's not about what you think but sharing ideas and working through these ... I believe that more professional development enables us to maintain that shared vision to grow together as a team. It is vital in our work ... celebrating what you do well and from that point stretching yourself ... I'm so proud of what we've done so far....

Siolo: Awesome! It seems like my brain is functioning again. (Siolo's humour is fun to be around.) It's really good to give children space for them to make their own decisions now They seem like they now know how to look after each other.... They are able to take responsibility We're learning each day and the workshops are refreshing... .

All this attention to reflective, thoughtful documentation flowed through into teachers' practice and their bravery was deeply seated in trying new ways of writing, stretching their abilities and putting huge effort into building a shared vision that was evident in their practice. As time went on they were driving change, writing fabulously thoughtful Learning Story assessments and building a community around learning that was vibrant.

After each visit I wrote down my reflections about the learning I had seen, practical suggestions, quotes and references to further support sustained progress. Below is my most recent letter. I thought this was now the time to think over the journey and to celebrate the successes and I think as you read this you will see how evident wise practice is in this centre.

5 September 2011

Dear Loretta, Siolo, Fili, Vise, Glenys, Melanie and Lee

As I visited today, everywhere I looked I encountered learning in action. I think it's important to write it down as I saw it, so you have a record of the breadth and depth of wise practice in your centre. I will be very interested to see what you think and I'm guessing you will see this as your usual practice, what happens in your place all the time now.

I walked into Samoa Taumafai and I encountered Siolo on the ramp with Sarah engaged in figuring out how the camera worked. It was obvious that Sarah

was conducting a photo shoot and was consulting a 'colleague' about technical issues. So fabulous to see such a collaborative engagement.

I walked around the corner to see small groups of children at work on goals they had set themselves. Bronson, for example and his group of 'apprentices' were engrossed in a book about space and much conversation centred on the astronauts and their adventures on the moon. Another small group was gathering for shared time together but there was no expectation that either the toddlers and infants having morning tea near the kitchen or Bronson and his friends, needed to stop their learning. It was a cordial invitation and the children there were very engaged. At one point, there was some discussion about staying focussed, if it was indeed children's intention to be involved and this I thought was completely fair, reasonably asked with high expectation that children would self regulate. They had choices after all and this is what they did.

Midway through group time, a song called for some adventures outside and only one child intimated she did not want to go. Siolo offered to stay with her. The others went off and meanwhile Siolo and Kiera cuddled up for a lovely chat together. This so reminded me of *Te Whatu Pōkeka* (2009), wrapping the programme around the child rather than making the child fit the programme. Such a fabulous example of *Te Whāriki* principles in action. As the children returned a little while later, the promise earlier to Keira that she would lead *lotu* was remembered and she did indeed lead prayers before morning tea. From my perspective, I felt that everything was relaxed, there were smooth transitions and nothing was hurried.

A little later, Vise had impromptu singing with the crawling infants and this was a lovely responsive time together with these very young children. A few paces away, Fili was assisting some children to go to the toilet or have their nappy changed and again this was unhurried and responsive, with intentional listening to each child's wishes. Peter, for example, was asked about his nappy and invited for a change, which he declined. Fili accepted this and with laughter chatted away to a few children close by. In a few moments, Peter indicated he'd had a change of mind and was now ready. He happily went off to the bathroom with Fili. There was no sense of a routine to rush through and children were very involved in all the learning processes.

Outside Melanie and Glenys had a group of very active children and although it was a cold day, they had warm clothes on and outside play was 'game on'. In some settings children are restricted from going outside but your teaching team clearly engages in the outdoors most of the time, and dress children appropriately. I loved the fact the younger children were watched carefully for signs of wanting to go outside. The door was closed

to keep the room warm but again children were not restricted, only supported to wrap up warmly first.

Everywhere I cared to look, children were engaged in learning with and alongside supportive teachers. I listened recently to a video clip by Russell Bishop (2009) from Waikato University and he says: (I'm paraphrasing a little here):

Highly effective teachers use the evidence of children's performance to guide where they take their teaching and they also ensure children know about their learning in a formative way. Effective teachers have high expectations for children's learning. The feedback and 'feed forward' messages are around dispositions to learn. It is about 'learners among learners', based upon teachers creating the context in the centre that is responsive to the child, responsive to the culture of the child. It is not child-centred education, it is relationships-based education. It is culturally responsive but also based upon the notion of relationships being paramount to learning performance. Caring for people, and creating caring relationships to ensure children learn. He terms this as a culturally responsive pedagogy of relationships

I think I saw this in action. You have set yourself very high goals and responded to challenge by finding your own pathway through and have created a culture of learning and teaching that works for you. Evidence abounds of this and what clearer way to illustrate this than to see your progress with narrative assessment through your Learning Stories. The bar graph on your wall is testament to your commitment to equity for all children's learning. Every child has at least one or two stories each month. And what fabulously thoughtful assessments they are! I think this needs to be preserved for posterity!

There is no doubt you have set yourself learning goals that have stretched both your abilities and your dispositions. You have persisted with difficulty and together you have grown your abilities. Sharing your Learning Stories together every Monday has signaled to your team members that this year there is a high expectation of involvement for each teacher and you have grown your abilities because of this. Thoughtful reflective, contextualised discussion has ensued. This has taken pedagogy away from anecdotal observation and drawn everyone into an understanding of what you all agree wise practice looks like in your place.

While Professional Development may have lifted your sights, it has been your commitment to considering your vision and your dreams, based on *Tē Whāriki* principles and the priorities you value from your Samoan culture and then taking these into your moment by moment practice, that has really made a difference to learning in your place. This difference was so visibly evident that a surprise visit from The Ministry of Education around April made them decide

to reinstate your full license. How much more would they see now of your committed, ongoing practice with documentation to support this nine months into our work together. I think you are all courageous and totally fabulous!!

Lorraine

I am going to have to leave soon and there will be tears but I no longer have a job there. Samoa Taumafai A'oga Amata is a 'leaderful' community (Sfard, 1998) and are working sustainably to optimise learning for their community. I am just so proud to have been part of this journey and so blessed to be considered a friend.

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Would you like to know more the A'oga's journey?

You might like to go to Educational Leadership Project's website (www.elp.co.nz; look under 'resources'). There is no better way to understand this journey than to hear Loretta, humbly, passionately and so very thoughtfully discuss their centre's journey.

Rethinking priorities

Making time for transformational conversations

Louise Taylor

We live in a time poor world and early childhood teachers are not immune to this. Time for professional learning is a “scarce resource” (MacNaughton, 2003, p.1), and professional conversations are often filled with the immediate and the urgent rather than the really important (Covey, 1989; Covey, Merrill & Merrill, 1995). Why is this?

Debating issues such as philosophy, identity, and social justice, for instance, seems to be sidelined once early childhood teachers finish their training and conversations are far more likely to be about the practical day-to-day issues of teaching. In my work as an early years facilitator, for example, it is common for me to hear comments such as:

- *We don't have time for meetings...*
- *We don't have much non-contact time...*
- *We only meet once a month for an hour...*
- *We don't get paid for meetings...*
- *I haven't had any professional development/learning this year*

I continue to see what I noted nearly ten years ago:

In education we talk about diversity and acceptance but my experience has taught me that in reality there is very little opportunity for exploring different opinions in depth. Professional development opportunities rarely provide the space for teachers to cross boundaries, break rules or share their thoughts in progress (Taylor, 2002, p. 13).

Being able to cross the boundaries into new thinking and ways of being is what I want for our profession. I believe that something can, and should be done about this, and that the time to make changes is now. In this article I explore how this might be done by reflecting on what the early childhood community in New Zealand is prioritising in their conversations and professional learning.

Conversations in centres: Changing priorities

How time is prioritised usually reflects what is valued the most (Covey, 1989; Covey, et al., 1995). What is valued the most can be observed in the conversations that teachers have and how their time is prioritised. In the late 1990s, Hatherly

wrote about the lack of time for professional discussion and debate in early childhood education. Her research on early childhood organisational culture highlighted how teacher discussions were primarily focused on practical activities such as routines and problems of the moment rather than theoretical and in-depth educational debate (Hatherly, 1999). My own doctoral findings suggest that little has changed (Taylor, 2007). The practical demands of teaching are endless and it is difficult for teachers to avoid spending all their time on routines and everyday problems.

The challenge for teachers is how to shift their attention from programme duties and rosters to other aspects of children's learning (Deans & Bary, 2008). Otherwise the work of teaching is “senseless busywork” where teachers are “imprisoned in routines” (Silin, 1995, pp. 42, 43), and the focus becomes organising what is coming next, who will be where, and how records can be kept for accountability (White, 2011). With each moment filled with activities, teachers and children are robbed of the opportunity to be immersed in the messiness, uncertainty and unrehearsed moments of life (Silin, 1995).

The big issues of life such as: who I am becoming? who you are becoming? and who we are becoming together? are lost to the tedium of getting through each day. This kind of teaching is more reactionary than revolutionary.

Repositioning routines

Thankfully not all centres are imprisoned in routines. Some have learnt how to make routines work for them and when they have, this has freed up precious time and space for the kind of professional conversations that require critical thinking about teaching and learning. Routines and problems of the moment, while a very necessary part of the care and education of children, can be organised so that they do not dominate.

To achieve this, centres may, ironically, need to spend considerable time initially working as a team to find a flexible system that works for them. One way to begin redefining how routines are positioned is to include children in discussions about these and to make this a thinking exercise (Salmon, 2010). Another approach is to consider how the day might work without rosters, as Deans and Bary

(2008) did in their infants and toddlers' room. Whatever the approach or decision, the objective is to clear a space for other thoughts and conversations.

When routines no longer dominate, teachers can pay attention to other aspects of their practice. The key is finding smart and creative ways to share general information throughout the day so that priorities can shift to thinking differently about the practice of teaching. Time can then be allocated to professional conversations about what Covey, et al (1995) call the *important*. In early childhood education the *important* includes issues such as teaching philosophy, learning, identity, equity and social justice. All of these *important* issues require conversations involving critical reflection and debate and for these to occur; there needs to be a commitment to creating time and space for this.

Covey et al. (1995) illustrate this point in a narrative about a seminar presenter who showed his audience a jar, which he then filled with large rocks. The presenter asked the audience "Is the jar full?", to which the audience replied "Yes!" The presenter went on to add gravel, then sand, and then a litre of water to the jar before asking:

"Well, what's the point?"

Somebody said, "Well, there are gaps, and if you really work at it, you can always fit more into your life."

"No," he said, "That's not the point. The point is this: if you hadn't put these big rocks in first, would you ever have gotten any of them in?" (p. 89)

In this story, Covey et al. highlight how making the *important* a priority, creates time and space. Placing the biggest stones in the jar first requires thinking about what is valued the most and this is a good starting point for introducing a new kind of conversation to teachers.

The teachers involved in my doctoral research were committed to professional conversations, meeting each month in their own time because they felt these were missing in their everyday workplace. These conversations provided a space for teachers to talk about the beliefs that underpinned their practice and moved them "outside of the customary talk around routines and programme planning; and this opened them up to new ideas" (Taylor, 2007, p. 188).

Professional conversations also exposed contradictions which led to questioning and redefining patterns of thinking and acting. Challenging the taken-for-granted was often the beginning of innovative thought. As one of the teachers in the project, Jan, reflected:

I needed to be part of a community of learners where I could deconstruct how I had come to where I was and how I could reconstruct my future practice. I realised that I needed to be able to explore my existing ideas and to articulate and defend them in argument, frustrations and all, so that I could see how my current pedagogical beliefs could be modified. Recapturing and redefining what I believed to be important about my practice has made me feel confident to try different



Professional conversations are the core of teacher learning and development. (Photo courtesy of Ruahine Kindergartens).

techniques and change my mind – free to take risks and dance in any direction that I choose (cited in Taylor, 2007, p. 185).

Jan and the others in my research project taught me how valuable professional conversations were to teachers. Without these, they had become isolated, frustrated, locked into practices that they didn't believe in any more and unable to debate theoretical issues, defend their practice or even imagine doing things differently.

Through the simple act of reprioritizing professional conversations by valuing these as really important, teachers experienced change in a way that they had not previously thought possible (Taylor, 2007). These teachers made a commitment to do this in their own time; this is one option. The other is for centres themselves to make a choice to prioritise professional conversations and to value these for their potential to bring about transformations in practice (Freire, 1996; 2003).

Conversations in professional learning: Expanding the possibilities

I have been involved in teacher professional learning for approximately 15 years and during this time I have found very few opportunities where teachers have engaged in critical thinking and educational debate with this as the main objective. Most professional learning for teachers is about how to put theory into practice in better ways. This is so, despite influential educationalists such as Freire (1996, 2003) and MacNaughton (2003, 2005) contending that critical dialogue is essential to transformational education.

When I examined the literature on teacher professional learning for my doctoral studies two trends stood out. These were:

- Professional learning to standardise the practice of teaching;
- Professional learning to teach and support evidence-based practice.

These trends focus on ensuring that there is consistency

between providers and that teachers are engaging in practices that were shown to be effective through research. Both trends were evident worldwide, across all education sectors, and have influenced policy decisions and the funded professional learning opportunities available to teachers. In New Zealand, these are evident in curriculum frameworks, centralised regulations, regular audits and by teacher accreditation through Teachers Council (Taylor, 2007).

While we have attained a standard in New Zealand that we can be proud of, as a profession we need to keep critiquing how we are doing and continuing to ask if we can improve. This includes reflecting on how the above trends have impacted on the way teachers have been positioned and the kind of professional learning available to them as a result of this positioning. Additionally, I have found it worthwhile to consider what teachers are talking about in their professional learning experiences.

Moss (2006) contends that teachers worldwide are being positioned more and more as technicians who work to meet specific standards aimed at achieving measurable outcomes. The task of a technician is primarily to apply the knowledge and expertise of others, and to become increasingly competent at doing this. Methods such as reflective practice are encouraged as a way for teachers to consider how they might improve their practice against the theories and standards set down by others (O'Conner & Diggins, 2002).

However, when professional learning neglects to include time for deconstruction and disruption of theory itself, then teachers are not gaining the skills needed for critical thinking and innovation. When disruptive dialogue is not part of professional learning then issues such as social injustice can go unchallenged (MacNaughton, 1999; Moss, 2001, 2006; Taylor, 2007).

Another consequence of this is teachers feeling overtaken, indifferent and unable to think for themselves. It is exhausting work trying to meet the changing expectations of others (Duncan, 2004; Long, 2004) and it is hard for teachers to develop their own knowing when they are used to operating as technicians. I am frequently asked by teachers:

- *Is this right?*
- *Am I allowed to do this?*
- *What will ERO say if I do/don't do this?*

Along with a fear of making mistakes, I have noticed an unhealthy reliance by teachers on others, such as myself, to tell them what to do and how to do it. It is rare, in my experience, to find teachers who are critically thinking about why they are doing what they are doing and the implications of these actions. It is even rarer to encounter teachers challenging the taken-for-granted discourses that have shaped the practice of teaching as they understand it. It takes an entirely new approach to professional learning and engagement in a different kind of conversation for teachers to move beyond being primarily technicians.

Other ways of being a teacher

In a recent article, White (2011) encourages teachers to engage differently with their practice and the curriculum. She asks the profession to “authentically engage in dialogue rather than promoting untroubled allegiance to prescribed systems” (p. 5).

One way that teachers can begin doing this is by sharing a strategy I employed during my doctoral research. In the group sessions, I encouraged teachers to ask questions without needing to find the right answers. To get the group started, I introduced them to the work of Glenda MacNaughton and in particular a keynote presentation of hers where she said:

In seeking truth we seek certainty that we have it right. In seeking knowledge we embrace the uncertainty of never knowing what is right. In seeking truth we seek one way forward for all. In seeking knowledge, we embrace the possibility of many ways forward. In seeking truth, we produce answers. In seeking knowledge, we produce questions (MacNaughton, 1999, p. 8).

This was a new approach to professional learning. One of the participating teachers, Jo, commented:

This is the first place that I have actually felt that it's not only acceptable but it's encouraged to ask questions and we don't have to have the answers, you ask whatever you want and just put it out there and that's what's really exciting I think to me ... once you start you just can't stop... when we ask a question we actually generate excitement... (cited in Taylor, 2007, p. 189).

The outcome for Jo was transformational. At first she responded by writing letters to me and then to herself:

Rather than answering my questions, Louise encouraged me to keep asking them and to allow myself the freedom to leave questions unanswered. This feedback prompted me to write more letters with more questions and this eventually led me to keeping a journal, which was really a series of letters to myself. I had tried to keep a journal in the past and I had always had trouble with this. I had used a journal to reflect on my practice but I always felt that I was writing what others wanted me to say. These letters to myself allowed me to write whatever I wanted and they became a way for me to trap, not only what I knew but also what I didn't know. I began to play around with, and explore, questions (Jo cited in Taylor, 2007, p. 190).

Jo's reflective journal took on a new life and this added a completely new dimension to her teaching which opened up her world to a range of new possibilities:

Asking open-ended questions and exploring why certain questions come up again and again, has resulted in me starting to reflect more on my beliefs and values and not just on my practice alone. I have started to look

behind my practice to why I respond the way I do and this has added a new dimension to my professional learning (cited in Taylor, 2007, p. 190).

This questioning stimulated what Freire (2003) called “epistemological curiosity” involving “a critical reading of the world” (p. 75) and engaging “pleasurably in a challenge” (p. 95). It is not difficult to start asking questions and challenging the taken-for-granted, because coming to a resolution is not the intention; rather the exercise is about engaging the mind and sharing in professional conversations with others.

This does not have to take much time and can be achieved alongside other professional learning. Over-emphasising the technical side of teaching leaves the taken-for-granted uncontested, and teachers dependent and at times disillusioned (Duncan, 2002; 2004). An alternative is choosing to create *some* space for professional conversations where teachers can challenge and question, just because it’s exciting to do so – and this is an option that can be introduced almost immediately.

Ways forward

My challenge to those working in early childhood is to rethink how time and professional learning is prioritised:

- Ask what is most valued and if it is professional conversations and critical inquiry, then try putting these ‘in the jar first’ (Covey et al., 1995).
- Start having some discussions where the objective is simply epistemological curiosity (Freire, 2003).
- Make it okay in your setting to ask questions where the objective is not to find the right answers but rather to explore education from a range of perspectives.

These small steps can be incorporated alongside what you already do and if you make these a priority, you can start now.

On a wider scale, I would like the early childhood profession in New Zealand to consider how it might create the space for teachers to engage in more critical debate, where the objective is to challenge the taken-for-granted and entertain what has never been tried before. We may all just find the outcomes transformational.

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Two stories

Innovative professional learning and development

Story 1: Using an E-portfolio for teacher registration.

By Annika Fry and Tara Fagan

From Annika, a registering teacher:

Coming straight out of University and into a full time job, the thought of teacher registration was overwhelming. The early childhood centre where I got my first teaching position was trying a new way of supporting provisionally registered teachers through creating a teaching 'triangle' which meant I had support from my supervisor as my registering teacher, and from an independent mentor, as well. My supervisor saw my everyday practice and could see my reflection in context. The 'offsite' mentor came in and observed and videoed aspects of my teaching and met with me periodically to discuss aspects of my teaching practice. Together they provided a strong supportive network.

Being in a centre which is very ICT focussed, I was encouraged to use a blog which is like an online diary where you could also post photos and videos. I was a bit apprehensive about who would be able to view it, and how hard it would be to make posts.

Beginning thoughts about the blog

My mentor was Tara from Core Education and she talked me through the steps of making a blog. Within a few minutes we had set up my blog focused on my teacher registration process. Tara gave me a tour of how it all worked and then left me to it to further explore on my own. At first, it all seemed very daunting but a few weeks later I thought I would explore it some more and tried to figure out how to post some photos. Having remembered how to make a post, I saw a symbol that looked like the symbol for photos so I clicked on that to choose a photo, and it worked! Now feeling a wee bit confident I was motivated to start making posts and get my teacher registration underway.

How I see the blog 18 months on

The blog has been very easy to get around. It is a place where I can reflect and make notes. I can add tags on each post that link up to the teacher registration criteria. What I like about the blog is that I can access it on any computer and there is no worry about losing pieces of paper or things getting lost or mixed up. It's all on the web.

Very quickly you learn how to work your way around the blog. The layout is easy, and the process is quite simple. I have been able to add photos, video, learning stories, and email comments from parents as evidence of what I have been done.

Other benefits:

It is a private blog so only my supervisor, my mentor and I are able to view and make comments. Because it is online the blog is very easy for all of us to access. We have the blog set up so the supervisor and mentor are both emailed when I have put up a new post. My supervisor and my mentor can quickly make comments in response to recent posts, meaning I am getting comments and conversations between my mentor, supervisor and myself very soon after I have written a reflection. This makes them more meaningful as they are still fresh in my mind. Their comments can help guide me further and get me thinking and reflecting more. It also means I can quickly take what I've learnt into my teaching with the children, so everyone is benefiting!

When my mentor and supervisor are looking for evidence in my teaching of a certain learning criteria, all they have to do is click on the tags and it will take them to all the entries I have done in that particular criteria. Everything is dated and the comments from my mentor and supervisor are underneath each post which is also dated, so I know when they have visited and read my blog.

I have spoken to a few other friends who are in the process of teacher registration and they have talked about how much they are struggling to get all their paper work done and how they just don't have the time to write things up. In contrast, my online blog is such a simple tool. Also the blog is helpful to quickly look back on and remind me of what I have done over the time which can be useful for my appraisals. I have the evidence right there on the blog to illustrate what I have been doing.

I will never look back. Blogging is easy to use. Being able to make tags to link posts to the teacher criteria, for example, makes it especially suitable for registering teachers. The more that I use my blog, the deeper and more meaningful my reflections are becoming. I will be continuing on with my blog well after I have completed my teacher registration as it is now my way of being able to reflect on my teaching.

From Tara, the off-site mentor:

Taking the time to explore the blog worked well for Annika. It was through this exploration that she discovered how she could make it work for her in terms of tagging items, uploading the photos and videos. More importantly, the blog enabled Annika to really deepen her practice. As she started out, her reflective practice was just scratching the surface of what was happening. Being able to view her journal, in its entirety, both her supervisor and I were able to add comments or questions to individual posts, while also making links back to previous reflections. Annika was open to this process and really responded to the feedback she was offered, often following up with new ideas or an extension

of her reflection. She has grown to be an incredibly reflective practitioner and a stunning teacher. The blog, including feedback, has contributed to this.

Where to blog? Where to find support for teacher registration? Here are Tara's recommendations:

To find out how to blog, and blog safely, visit: <http://www.educate.ece.govt.nz/learning/exploringPractice/ICT/IntroductionToBlogging.aspx>

For more on involving parents through blogging, visit: <http://www.educate.ece.govt.nz/learning/exploringPractice/ICT/LinksToFamiliesAndICT/LinksToFamilyVignettes.aspx?p=2>

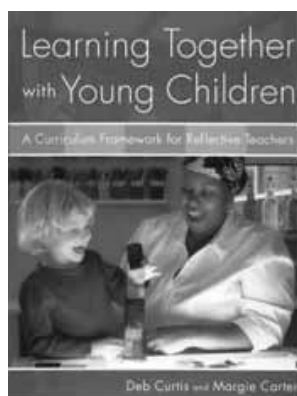
For more on using blogs and eportfolios, visit <http://eeonline.core-ed.org/pg/groupcms/view/17942/>

For more on reflective practice, visit: <http://eeonline.core-ed.org/pg/groupcms/view/17943/>

Story 2: PD by the book

By Hayley Mathieson

As I am standing in the playground, I notice the baby and toddler area has a new table set up which is clearly inviting for children. I compliment a colleague on the table, and she tells me how much the children enjoy exploring the ocean-inspired natural materials that she has carefully selected and placed on the table. I ask what had inspired her to make this change and to start a natural discovery area for the children. She refers to the book we had used as a focus for our professional development over the last year and the chapter specifically about the environments.



This article tells the story of our teaching team's decision to take an 'in-house' approach to professional development in 2010, including how we went about it and what we would recommend to other centres contemplating a similar move.

Northcote Baptist Childcare Centre is a community-based early childhood centre licensed for 45 children from six months to five years, operating on Auckland's North Shore. Most of the 12 teachers are trained and have worked there for more than five years. I have been a teacher there for seven years.

As staff we are lucky to work in a centre where we have heaps of fun, and get loads of support. We are a close knit group, rather like a big family. As with families we do have our differences though, both personally and professionally; however, there is a

culture of professional respect which is evident in everything we do. The leader of our team works hard to promote this environment, by taking deliberate steps to focus us on learning and reflection. We are encouraged to be proactive about our own learning, as well as that of the children.

As a team we have long been committed to engaging in on-going professional learning, both through gaining qualifications and through participating in initiatives offered through professional development providers. The committee and centre manager have lent their weight to this by including a strong commitment to professional development as part of the centre's strategic plan and yearly budget. In the early 2000s, we were involved in centre-based professional development programmes on assessment using the resource *Kei tua o te pae*, assessment for learning (Ministry of Education, 2004/2007/2009).

These programmes had a great impact upon our team's practice by challenging our thinking in different areas and getting to the heart of the values and beliefs that influenced our teaching. When we stopped this centre-based professional development, we moved into a period of professional development where individual teachers had the opportunity to go to courses in their own areas of interest and need. What we found was that, although these one-off courses were great at times, there were some that failed to offer the quality of learning and relevance that teachers were searching for.

This dissatisfaction together with the discovery of a book we felt would be useful to read through as a team, led to us trying out a new approach to our professional development. A desire to improve our environment led us to *Designs for living and learning: Transforming early childhood environments* (Carter & Curtis, 2003). We discovered the book at an online bookshop which paired it with another which we decided to buy on a whim: *Learning together with young children: A curriculum framework for reflective teachers* (Carter & Curtis, 2008). The synopsis of this book suggested it would provide a model for child-centred, relationship-based teaching with extensive practical applications. It was an amazing find, an absolute treasure trove. As a few of us took the time to delve into its pages, we found that we wanted to share our thoughts and reflect on the concepts with each other. It was at this point that we decided to do professional learning a little differently and to work through one of the books. We were unsure of what to expect because we hadn't tried anything like this before, but all agreed it was worth giving a go. So our centre purchased a copy of the book for each of the teachers, and we stepped into a new learning journey of in-house professional development.

How we did it

The book had nine chapters including an introductory chapter. We decided to cover one chapter during each professional development meeting. We had decided that we would read the relevant chapter of the book before each meeting so we could start thinking about the concepts and ideas before we were going to discuss them at the meeting. Instead of using our usual staff meeting times for this professional development time, we agreed to meet outside of the centre hours for about 90 minutes twice a term. This meant that the meetings were focussed entirely on

the chapter at hand. There was the freedom within the meetings for members of the team to point out something that they had noticed and been reflecting on. This discussion took up the majority of time within these meeting. In the book we used, there were several practical examples and reflective questions which provided talking points leading to in-depth discussions. The discussions tended to continue during our day-to-day work with the children, as we saw how the different ideas and concepts within the book played out practically in our centre. The professional development lasted for the whole year as we had a couple of meetings each term.

As the year wore on, different staff members were given the chance to practice their leadership skills by facilitating the professional development meetings, and this added a new dimension to the meetings because different teacher have varying leadership styles. Leading a meeting gave the staff member the opportunity to influence the direction of discussions and ideas, and manage the time spent discussing different aspects of conversation. Generally the meetings were started with an interactive time where the ideas in the chapter could be refreshed for the team (who had already read the chapter). For example, when I led the meeting around environments, I took several photos of our environments and displayed them, posing questions such as what aspects of these photos look inviting? Or not? We talked about what we generally found appealing within our own environments, and what wasn't attractive at all. This led into a discussion about the key points within the chapter around enhancing the curriculum with materials. This was a really valuable part of the book and of our professional development time. For anyone thinking of engaging in professional development in this manner, I would recommend selecting the book carefully, as one with these talking points and reflective questions in it could really enhance the process.

Upon reflection, I recognise that this professional learning approach was so different for us and also hugely valuable. I can see the impact it has had on us as a team, as our professional discussions have deepened and have become more frequent. The changes in teachers' practice were easy to see at times – such as teachers thinking more about creating engaging environments. There were more subtle changes too, such as a deepening of learning stories. We also saw routines in the different areas within the centre being challenged, discussed and changed, and teacher's views of children, and therefore the resources provided for them growing. Additionally, because the book is still with us (unlike a facilitator who comes and goes), we can refer back. Like all professional development, there were some really valuable concepts and new ideas that we discovered, and some that were not relevant to our centre or community. Despite this, even the concepts and ideas that were not particularly well aligned with our centre created talking points during the meetings.

If we were to take this approach to professional learning again, I think there is one thing we could do to improve the process and gain even greater value and that is to team up with another centre of reflective teachers interested in discussing the same book. If I have a criticism of what we did in 2010 it is that we missed out on the different views that you can get when you attend professional development outside of the centre or have someone who comes to you. While the contents of the book certainly

gave us new information, challenges and perspectives, it did so passively. You cannot debate issues with a book as you can with people.

It is hard to tell how much our discussions was limited by the beliefs and assumptions we have developed as a team about what is possible. I'm convinced that teachers within other childcare centres and kindergartens would bring different perspectives and pick out different values that are important to them, and having these would enrich the learning.

I can fully recommend the book we worked through, although I am aware there as so many amazing books and resources out there which are available for centres to use for this purpose.

Taking an in-house approach as we did is something I would recommend trying occasionally as part of the mix of professional development approaches available. With the right book this form of professional development could be successful anywhere.

For those considering it, here are some points to consider:

In regards to the teaching team:

- you need to be a reasonably reflective to start with;
- you need to be committed to PD (including making the time for meetings, and reading chapters ahead of time)

In regards to choosing the book:

- it needs to be relevant to the centre and community; and needs to excite the team;
- it helps to have reflective questions and/or exercises embedded in the chapters.

In regards to the centre:

- it helps to have an action plan at the end of each professional development session – including indicators that will show teachers adapting and changing their practice.

Remember the benefits of getting together with another centre with the same commitment to professional learning as your centre.

In conclusion, as a form of professional development, this form of in-house PD has the potential to be successful in a variety of early learning settings. It's worth a go, at least!

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Leadership

Leveraging the benefits of professional learning

Barbara Watson and Bridgit Williams

The importance of effective pedagogical leadership in early childhood contexts has been an emerging dialogue over the past few years both in New Zealand and globally. Many researchers and writers have highlighted the importance of robust and purposeful leadership in promoting a culture focused on inquiry into and ongoing refinement of teaching practice with the aim of improving outcomes for children (Thornton, 2010; Jansen, Cammock & Conner, 2010; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009).

The current fiscal climate has significantly impacted on the accessibility to professional learning funding available to the early childhood sector, and there is the need for even greater cognisance of the power of effective leadership to maximise the professional learning dollar. Robinson et al. (2009) have identified that the single factor that most strongly influences improved outcomes for children is the professional leaders' support of and involvement in professional learning. A leader who sources, resources, role models and actively promotes engagement in effective professional learning has the potential to leverage the beneficial outcomes not only for teachers and children but for the organisation as a whole.

When considering professional learning, a pedagogical leader may be wise to ask:

- What are the professional learning needs of the service?
- What options are available to address these needs?
- What outcomes are we expecting?
- Which option will best meet these ends?
- What is my role in optimising professional learning?

This article aims to assist a pedagogical leader in answering these questions for their context.

What are the professional learning needs of the centre?

There are a number of sources from which the professional learning needs of a teaching team can be determined. In the ideal scenario, information from all of these sources will be utilised when making a decision regarding the future direction of professional learning. Sources that may contribute to this decision are the findings of a self-review, the result of professional discussion and reflection, consultation with parents/whānau, recurring themes visible through appraisal and the recommendations of an ERO review.

Robust self-review will identify the gaps between current knowledge and capability and desired programme outcomes and teaching practice. What is needed to close these gaps will therefore provide a potential focus for professional learning. Professional discussion may highlight lack of coherence or consistency in teachers' understandings, beliefs and/or approaches. Consultation with parents may make visible assumptions that require further exploration to ensure authentic partnership and ERO reviews often make recommendations that professional learning is undertaken in specific areas of focus.

What options are there available to address these needs?

Positioning professional learning as part of the ongoing professional responsibility of a teacher is not news to most. However, the re-conceptualisation of professional learning may take both time and deliberate action on the part of the leader, in order to broaden the range of possibilities beyond the workshops or conferences that have historically been considered. There is a need to shift teachers' perceptions from a view of professional learning as an occasional break away from the demands of the centre to stock up on some new ideas, to a focus on reflection and inquiry into one's practice. This may not be easy, but it is vital if professional learning is to be effective and sustainable. Although not always viewed as professional learning, targeted professional reading, and purposeful observation of others' practice, as well as consideration and subsequent discussion of reflective questions are all useful and cost effective means of developing practice. Collaborations with other centres in the form of teacher swaps, joint meetings and centre visits are other possibilities that promote engagement with alternative perspectives.

In-centre professional learning with an external facilitator, involving the whole teaching team, provides an alternative viewpoint on current practice, new content knowledge and facilitated development of strategies in order to affect change (Blenkin & Kelly, 1997). The benefits of working with a quality external facilitator are well documented (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007) and are effectively summarised here by Timperley (2008): "... The engagement of expertise external to the group of participating teachers is necessary because substantive new learning requires teachers to understand new content, learn new skills, and think about their existing practice in new ways (p. 20)."

What outcomes are we expecting?

Being clear about the desired outcomes of professional learning will help to inform the leaders' decision-making and ensure that engagement contributes to the strategic direction of the centre and the ongoing learning and development of teachers. The key outcome of any engagement in professional learning should be the improvement of learning outcomes for children. This is the key motivator for seeking to improve teaching practice and is at the core of all pedagogical endeavours. Some of the possible outcomes for teachers engaging in professional learning are:

- acquisition of professional skills and knowledge;
- promotion of reflective practice, enhancement of teamwork and collaboration;
- development of shared understandings and approaches;
- building of a professional learning community; and
- refinement and improvement of practice.

All of these outcomes are likely, in turn, to contribute to improved outcomes for children.

Identifying which of these are currently of the highest priority for the centre will be one factor in determining the most appropriate approach. It is advisable to use the goals of the centre's strategic/annual plans to inform priorities for professional learning. These goals may highlight specific areas of focus for whole centre programmes and for individual teachers. Consideration of the strategic priorities of the centre matched with the appropriate approach will ensure congruence between expectations and outcomes of professional learning.

Which option will best meet these ends?

If the core purpose of engaging in professional learning is for a specific teacher to develop specific knowledge or skills, then attendance at a workshop may be a suitable option. However, care needs to be taken to ensure that both the approach of the facilitator and the actions of the teacher attending support the transfer of the newly acquired learning into practice within their context. The leader also has a critical role in promoting and supporting this process. Before accessing one-off workshop options, consider whether there is the capability already within the centre to support the teacher in acquiring the necessary skills or knowledge. Utilising the existing capacity within the centre will not only be cost effective, but will also contribute to the professional learning of the other teachers involved in the process.

Research shows that in-centre professional learning, involving the whole teaching team over an extended time period, is most likely to result in improved team relationships, shared understandings and sustained and purposeful change (Timperley et al, 2007). This is largely



Acquisition of professional skills can be a collaborative effort. (Photo courtesy of Ruahine Kindergartens).

due to the fact that the teaching team is engaging in a shared experience and therefore has the opportunity to hear the same messages, engage in professional discussion and work together to transfer their new understandings into practice. Teams working within whole centre programmes often report that a key outcome is enhanced teamwork resulting from a purposeful, collaborative inquiry into improving an aspect of practice. Whole centre programmes therefore, serve the dual purpose of improving practice and supporting the development of a professional learning community (Thornton, 2010).

A facilitated whole centre programme ought to be negotiated between the teaching team and the facilitator, both in content and approach. The facilitator uses facilitation skills and in-depth knowledge of the early childhood sector to introduce fresh ideas and to actively support and encourage teachers to engage with these ideas. This engagement results in the development of a focused and specific plan to affect positive change and improve outcomes for children. It is, therefore, important to identify external providers who have the requisite knowledge complemented by strong skills in facilitation.

What is the leader's role in optimising professional learning?

Consultation with the team before embarking on a professional learning programme will mean that the focus for the programme is supported by the team. This co-constructive approach increases the likelihood that teachers will feel a part of the learning programme, and therefore participate more actively in it. Conversely, a 'being done to' approach is likely to result in resistance and resentment from a team who has not had their opinions sought, let

alone valued; the result being that the desired outcomes are not met.

As a leader it may be easier to release one or two teachers to attend a workshop during the day rather than schedule designated times for the whole team to meet over a number of months. However shared understandings cannot be developed in one-off workshops attended by individual teachers, and it is difficult for one or two teachers to drive a process of change without the commitment of their colleagues. Therefore, change is often minimal and not sustained (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Guskey, 2000; Fullan, 2005; Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis, 2005).

The leader's role in facilitating the shift in teachers' perceptions of professional learning is critical and can take place in a number of ways, including:

- having conversations with the team regarding the implications of strategic and/or annual plans for identifying a purposeful focus for professional learning;
- revisiting the impact of one-off workshops in terms of improvements to practice;
- discussing the need for obtaining optimum value for the money spent on professional learning; and
- undertaking robust self-review.

These can help leaders begin to influence ideas of what constitutes effective professional learning.

For a leader promoting a broad and strategic view of professional learning in order to maximise outcomes for children, there are many actions that can be taken. As previously mentioned, discussions regarding the definition and purpose of professional learning are a useful starting point. Other useful strategies a leader may employ are:

- Ensuring that time together as a teaching team is prioritised and spent discussing teaching and learning. Developing some reflective questions to start conversations is an effective way of focusing discussion;
- Spending time as a team creating a vision for your centre and the service you want to provide for families and children;
- Creating a centre culture where professional challenge, discussion and inquiry are actively encouraged and supported. Using non-contact time to observe others in practice, creating systems for professional feedback, and maximising time discussing teaching and learning both formally and informally are some of the ways this could be achieved;
- Continually working on aligning practice within the centre with what is stated in your centre philosophy, by challenging practices and addressing inconsistencies;
- Engaging the services of an external facilitator who will support the team in developing ways of achieving effective outcomes. Look for skills in facilitation as well

as focus or topic knowledge.

By taking a strategic view and deliberately identifying with the teaching team the desired outcomes of professional learning, a leader can make robust decisions about how to allocate resources for the optimum effect. By aligning everyday leadership actions with these desired outcomes, a leader can leverage the positive impact of the resources spent and gain the maximum benefit for the teachers, children and organisation as a whole. Building a professional learning community focused on on-going and purposeful inquiry into their practice, and with the intention of making positive change, will enable professional learning to have sustained and profound pedagogical benefits. The active and effective engagement in this process by the professional leader has significant impact on outcomes for children. Leading for professional learning is not an option. In today's climate, it is a necessity.

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One step at a time

Ruahine teacher-researchers navigate a scholarship

Gaylyn Campbell

‘Take the first step in faith. You don’t have to see the whole staircase...’

With this quote from Martin Luther King Jr. in our minds, the Ruahine Kindergarten Professional Service Managers (PSM) embarked on the first step of a steep learning curve. We wanted to be able to support teachers to research aspects of their practice with the intent of improving learning outcomes for children and supporting teachers in their drive towards excellence. We acknowledge the work of the *Centres of Innovation* in providing us with a model we could adapt to our context, including the use of ‘critical friends’ and the methodology of participatory action research (Meade, 2005).

Ruahine Kindergartens provides support, leadership and guidance to 25 kindergarten learning communities within the Manawatu. There are three Professional Service Managers (PSM) whose main task is to provide support and advice to over 95 teachers. This story is told by us – the PSM team – but sitting alongside are the voices of the teachers involved in this scheme to improve practice in the form of quotes taken from the evaluation sheets gathered at the end of the first year.

The development of a scholarship

In 2009 within the Ruahine Awards, a scholarship scheme was established. All teachers or teacher teams were eligible to submit applications for the scholarship which included financial support for the year. Initially the broad objective was “to develop, grow and enhance the service provided by our kindergartens”. Drawn from the desire to build on good teaching already occurring or to develop areas of interest evident within kindergartens at that time, there were three categories: technology in teaching; tikanga Māori; and curriculum development.

However, things changed (not unlike the movable staircases in the Harry Potter stories). So while the money provided was initially to be used to attend seminars, visit other centres, travel, accommodation and the completion of university papers, the categories grew to include teacher release time, the purchase of equipment, even a private dinner and professional dialogue with Guy Claxton! Now who would have thought that could happen at the beginning of the process?

Scholarship funding included 20 hours of a ‘critical friend’s time. This enabled an outsider’s view of the research, to ask questions to ensure the focus was maintained and provide

alternative sources of information or expertise as required (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter & McDonald, 2003). Key questions were identified by the PSM team and management to help us determine who should be awarded the scholarships. These included:

- Will completion of the scholarship benefit the children and families/whānau directly involved in the kindergarten; and the career development of the applicant/s; and Ruahine Kindergartens, as well?
- Will the proposed goals or aims of the research be achieved by the applicants’ research design; and how original is the topic?

Three teaching teams were awarded the scholarship, which began in 2010. Their questions of inquiry were:

1. *How can we create a kindergarten culture that strengthens children’s learning power?*
2. *What are the educational benefits of providing natural environments for children and whānau?*
3. *How well are we providing opportunities for our community of learners to build and enhance children’s learning through using ICT as a tool to enhance their exploration and enquiry?*

Initially the development of these objectives and the research itself occurred within the Ruahine Kindergartens format for self review. The idea was that each kindergarten would have two self reviews underway at any one time and the research the scholarship recipients would undertake would be one of the reviews. Each teacher was then required to develop a small goal within the major focus and work on this. We quickly realised this was not plausible. It was too hard, too messy, too distracting and not really how research works as the focus became making the research question fit the format rather than refining the research topic. This was a disheartening time for the researchers and although they didn’t say it directly, possibly also a frustrating time for the critical friends.

On further reflection, we decided the workload was unmanageable and we let go of the self review format entirely for the scholarship kindergartens, which teachers appreciated

This meant the teachers could focus on the research. What a relief it was! This taught us a valuable lesson: *beware of organisational expectations which can hinder research, even*

with the very best of intentions. This did, however, provide the PSM team with a great opportunity to review formats.

Built into the scholarship scheme were 1-2 page milestone reports due at the end of each term. These were reviewed by the PSM team, and feedback was provided. We were looking for evidence of progress, any emerging themes, issues or challenges we could 'troubleshoot' and the development of an action plan for the term ahead. These milestone reports were a great tool. They provided a useful means of monitoring for us and encouraged teachers to summarise their findings to date and plan for the next term. We also held meetings each term where all the scholarship kindergartens could come together with their critical friend, if possible. This was a forum where teams could share their highlights and discuss the challenges they were facing. We wanted to create a supportive 'community of learners' as they were engaging in similar research activities, albeit with a slightly different focus. We quickly learnt we needed to make these meetings relevant and meaningful as practitioner researchers are busy people! On the whole these meetings were productive and kept the momentum going. There is nothing like the motivation of needing to have something to share with others.

Identifying key themes through evaluation

As this was the first time we had run the scholarship scheme (there was frequent use of the words "guinea pig" from the research teams), we needed to ensure careful evaluation would occur. We chose to wait until the end of the year to do this. The evaluation took the form of questionnaires to each kindergarten team and to each teacher individually. We were particularly interested to hear how teachers felt they had grown professionally, the benefits for children and whānau, any barriers to research and any ways in which we could refine the scholarship scheme.

Professional Learning: Teachers felt they were engaged in a range of professional learning during their research. This included the topic of their research, along with the development of research skills such as data gathering, critiquing readings, analysing information, developing frameworks and presentation skills. Teachers became more knowledgeable, and as one reflected:

The current research and literature we have investigated has been great for strengthening my professional knowledge. Discussing this further with our critical friend and other colleagues has also supported this growth and understanding. Alongside this was the opportunity to reflect critically on my practice through the analysis of my interactions and teaching via video recording.

From the best evidence synthesis on teacher professional learning and development, we know children's learning is influenced by what teachers know and are able to do (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fong, 2007). When this knowledge is gathered in the process of investigating their own practice, it is clear there are positive effects on learning and teaching (Mitchell & Cubey, 2003).

From Anne Nation, Somerset Kindergarten, Palmerston North

Challenges were undertaken, skills were developed, relationships built. I have been a teacher for many years, so this project was a big challenge for me both personally and in leading the team. I have developed my reflection skills along the way and learnt a great deal on research. We now look to the next challenge!

An illustration of an increase in a teacher's sense of agency can be found in one teacher's response about what she had learnt: *"finding the depth of my knowledge and my experiences are valuable tools in working on a scholarship. ...I do have a lot to offer."*

Obstacles: All teams spoke about the difficulty of balancing their commitment to the research along with other aspects of their jobs and their personal lives. This produced stress despite the provision of release time. Although a new teacher indicated "immense" professional learning, she also said:

Time and balance are the greatest barriers I have faced and I know this is to be expected when you are a new teacher. I find that as a new teacher the balance between teaching duties and scholarship has been significantly uneven; I am a new teacher wanting to learn the nuts and bolts.

There is a very real warning here. Just how much stress can you place on teachers at any level of their development as a teacher? This beginning teacher is an extremely high performing teacher who could meet the demands of research. This may not always be the case.

Confusion at the beginning of the process around the strategic goal framework also added to the stress levels that people were feeling. In addition, teachers felt one year was not long enough, particularly when there was the expectation they would share their findings with others. Another barrier identified by teachers was "not knowing what was expected." This 'unknown quantity' was referred to by a number of teachers. This could be minimised by ensuring teachers are made aware of what research entails.

Another issue which impacted adversely on the research included staff changes:

This affected the motivation of the team. As leader I needed to bring back that enthusiasm. At times it felt overwhelming; pressure on time and energy.

This additional pressure on those in leadership positions was acknowledged by another Head Teacher: *"From a leadership viewpoint it has required considerable energy, time and effort to maintain the right 'head space' to lead the enquiry and this was a significant challenge."*

Outcomes for families and children: Many beneficial outcomes for children and families were identified. As one teacher reflected:

I believe we are better able to articulate our pedagogy and

children's learning (e.g. narratives) with families and the wider community – we have also become even more reflective practitioners, more mindful of our role in orchestrating the environment, the language (verbal and non-verbal) we use to commentate, model and explain, as we strive for a 'potentiating' learning environment for children.

That teachers are able to promote and provide children with an environment of challenge, an environment where ideas can become reality, an environment of question, theory and investigation, an environment that nurtures and supports growing dispositions, and environment that transforms "I can't" into "I can", an environment with confident knowledgeable teachers who share children's successes with their families and work with families to extend learning and development. An environment that highlights competent, resilient lifelong learners.

While this quote is about one teacher's view of what learning has occurred for children, it could easily be about the teachers' learning from the perspective of the PSM team.

Conclusions

Based on the evaluations, it is clear the intent of the initiative has been met. There has been growth in the research abilities of the teachers involved along with their reflective skill and abilities and their knowledge base. Teaching excellence within Ruahine Kindergartens has been enhanced, which in turn provides high quality educational opportunities, leading to positive learning outcomes for children.

We believe improving learning outcomes for children and building teacher capacity cannot be separated. We support the assertion by Anne Meade (2009) that teacher inquiry provides transformational professional learning. We think this type of professional learning may be more effective than attendance at one-off day courses and in a climate of reduced opportunities, due to financial constraints for professional learning, a great way to invest in our teachers.

Over time we have learnt a great deal. This learning can be summarised as:

- ensuring the provision of adequate time for research activities, such as data collection, reading, analysing, and meeting with colleagues;
- a sufficient allocation of money and materials;
- support from critical friends in areas such as acquiring the skills and language of research, project management, and encouragement to present work to wider audiences;
- clarity and where possible, flexibility around organisational expectations and research demands; and
- leadership that understands and supports research.

We will make some changes in our next round of scholarships to reflect these concerns. What is quite clear is that we will get better at this. What is required is an open mind, the courage to take the first step even though we don't know where this leads and to keep taking further steps even

though the 'staircase' may move. We need persistence to ensure we stick at it when it gets hard. In addition, one of the research kindergartens would emphasise the need to embrace challenge and in the process become resilient learners. Teachers become enthusiastic researchers who want to explore their practice even though it gets tough at times. As one teacher researcher reflected:

In many ways I feel like it would be great to keep developing our ideas given the experience and knowledge base that we now have to enable us to build on our understandings and further this research. I'm pretty sure not everyone in the team feels the same right now. In ways, I feel that this has been a useful 'pilot study' and I would be in a much better position to take on a more robust enquiry next year!!!!

Having climbed the moving 'staircase' one step at a time, we've come to see that instead of knowing the process and the destination beforehand, research has enabled us to shed light on the unknown as we have moved along together.

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From Nicola Billman, West End Kindergarten, Palmerston North:

One area (of the scholarship research) that has also supported the depth and authenticity of our team professional dialogue has been the critical reflection on practice through the analysis of our interactions with children via the video recording during the data collection phase. This required a lot of courage and a great deal of trust within the team as we shared our own video footage, critically reflecting on our own personal teaching strategies and interactions with children. The power of this as an assessment tool for our own learning has been so great that we envisage using it again regularly within our team.

The Taskforce reports

Designing policy for e.c.e.

Michael Mintrom

Questions of when and how governments should support the well-being of citizens have preoccupied political philosophers and social theorists since ancient times. The answers we provide shape the social contract – the set of actual and implied agreements guiding how citizens relate to their government and to each other.

Those questions on the role of government in society preoccupied the Taskforce on Early Childhood Education, which launched its report in June 2011. (Early Childhood Taskforce, 2011). I chaired the Taskforce. This essay offers background on the Taskforce, the work we did together, and the legacy we hoped to leave. Towards the end, I explain how the policy design work we did promises to support greater sector unity and strength.

The Taskforce report, *An agenda for amazing children*, recommended that the current Government – and future New Zealand governments – give top priority to funding high-quality early childhood education. Such investment in our youngest citizens could yield many positive social outcomes. Several considerations led us to this conclusion.

First, exposure to high-quality early childhood education has both short and long term benefits for the individuals receiving it. This is confirmed by an extensive body of evidence derived from sound international research.

Second, every child has a right to access high-quality early childhood education. Respecting that right increases the likelihood that all citizens will reach their full potential through the education system and in adulthood.

Third, particular efforts, backed by additional resources, should be made to ensure access for New Zealand children who, in the past, have been under-represented in early childhood education services. More must be done to assist Māori children, Pasifika children, children from families of low socioeconomic status, and children with special education needs to access appropriately delivered, high quality services.

In *An agenda for amazing children*, we proposed that government subsidies to early childhood education be directed to those services that deliver high-quality. We presented a new funding model containing incentives for

services to increase their quality and to find effective ways to work with all children. New Zealand's early childhood education sector should continuously improve. To this end, we proposed actions to ramp up staff education and professional development. We proposed an innovation fund. And we called for parents to have better information about the quality of early childhood services.

If our policy recommendations are adopted, they will make New Zealand's early childhood education sector a world leader. But our proposals would not cost the earth. A lot can be done by reprioritising current government spending, both in the sector and beyond it.

Why should every New Zealander care about ensuring broad access to high quality early childhood education? Research shows that, longer term, those who have participated in high quality early childhood education tend to pursue advanced education, attain steady employment, enjoy good health, and face less risk of needing welfare support or of committing crime. In the short-term, exposure to high quality early childhood education increases children's well-being. It helps build a range of cognitive and social skills allowing them to work well with others. It also gives opportunities to parents to gain support with the tough work of parenting. It can give parents confidence that their children are safe, happy, and stimulated when they are doing other things, like volunteering, training, or engaging in paid work.

Those positive outcomes mean governments can look forward to spending less in the future on social services, while having more people engaged in productive activities. In turn, that means more resources can be devoted to continuously building a strong economy and society. Nobody would be left behind. Indeed, this social investment approach would create more resources to support the chronically ill and the elderly.

Viewed broadly, *An agenda for amazing children* posited a new social contract for New Zealand. That social contract differs from the 'cradle to grave' concept of the welfare state because it assumes a different model of human development. Too often in the past, New Zealanders have been complacent about children failing in school. We have produced cohorts of young people who have faced few

options in life. As adults, they have lived on the margins of society. They have frequently relied on welfare support, made greater-than-average calls on the public health system, and – in the worst cases – put spending pressure on the justice system. Wasting talent and warehousing people has had costly social consequences and has ruined lives.

In stark contrast, our work highlighted the value to individuals and society of making serious investments in the earliest years of a child's life, for every child. The new social contract we put forth backs families, helps children acquire vital life skills, and empowers people to make the very most of their lives. Doing everything we can to nurture amazing children will transform New Zealand into an amazing country.

It is that simple. Our amazing country will afford excellent systems of public health and education, will be able to support those who cannot support themselves, and will be able to invest in continuous economic growth. Those options are more attractive than excessive spending on welfare benefits and prisons. If adopted, our recommendations would lay the foundations for a thriving future for all New Zealanders.

Impetus for a Taskforce

When the Taskforce was announced, many people in the sector assumed that it was established to do a hatchet job on funding to early childhood education. Against the backdrop of the recent policy change that saw funding for qualified teachers reduced from a maximum of 100% to a maximum of 80%, it seems entirely reasonable to me that people would have held this fear about our work.

That said, the indicators that I received prior to the start of the Taskforce work suggested something different. My understanding was that the Government primarily wanted to gain reassurance that this area of public expenditure represented good value for money. While the Terms of Reference for the Taskforce clearly stipulated that there should be no recommendations for new spending, there was no stipulation that we should look for places where funding could be reduced.

The Terms of Reference are also important for what they tell us about the broader perspective the Government wanted us to take in our work. We chose to interpret our brief widely. The limitations on what we covered were imposed by time constraints, not by any directions given to us by the Government.

The Taskforce members

The Taskforce comprised nine people. The composition of the membership was determined by the Minister of Education, in consultation with her Cabinet colleagues and advisors from the Ministry of Education. Previous taskforces on early childhood education had tended to be comprised of people representing agencies in the public service.

Ours was very different. I was the only member of the taskforce who had extensive knowledge of policy

development and the policymaking process. The other members all had experience and subject-knowledge expertise that was invaluable for informing our work. All of us, in our different ways, had well-developed networks of contacts that we were able to draw on whenever we needed to discuss specific issues or acquire knowledge of specific practices of relevance to our work.

Of the members, three had extensive experience in the provision of early childhood education services. Tanya Harvey, General Manager of the Auckland Kindergarten Association, brought expertise in managing kindergartens and early learning centres. Aroaro Tamati, Director of Te Kōpae Pūpono Immersion Māori Early Childhood Centre in New Plymouth, brought expertise in meeting the needs of Māori children and communities. Ron Viviani, Director of Pacific Guardian Childcare Ltd., brought expertise in working alongside Pasifika early childhood education services. Three other members brought extensive knowledge of child development, issues in transition to school, and sector leadership. Peter Reynolds, Chief Executive of the Early Childhood Council, brought skills in business management and governance to the Taskforce. Professor Anne Smith is recognised as a leading researcher in early childhood development. Laurayne Tafa is the principal of Homai School, a decile two primary school in Manurewa. She brought experience in school and community leadership and knowledge of the needs of children as they transition to the school setting. Three more members brought relevant contextual knowledge to the Taskforce. Professor Richie Poulton, Director of the internationally-renowned Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Research Unit at the Dunedin School of Medicine, brought expertise in child development and psychology. Claire Johnstone, General Manager of Business Services for Hutt City Council, brought knowledge of public sector management. For my part, I brought to the Taskforce extensive knowledge of policy design, experience in team leadership and project management, and knowledge of ways to lead educational change.

Working together

The work of the Taskforce was supported by a secretariat, comprising of five policy analysts. All were seconded from the Ministry of Education. The composition of the Secretariat changed as our work progressed, and people with different skills came in and out of the group. As the chair of the Taskforce, I worked very closely with the secretariat. Among other things, I discussed the direction of the analytical work pretty much on a daily basis with the Head of the Secretariat and often worked directly with particular analysts. The set of background papers they produced were crucial for assisting members of the Taskforce to rapidly grasp all the issues at stake in our work. Additional background papers were commissioned as our work proceeded.

To give more of a sense of how the Taskforce worked together, I will briefly explain the process that led to the development of the final report, *An agenda for amazing*

children. I proposed the title of the report and the basic structure. It is composed of two main parts. Part One is an overview, entitled ‘The role of government in early childhood education’. I drafted this part, with input from the Secretariat. Part Two was entitled, ‘Making change happen: Eleven essays on policy design’. My primary contribution here was to devise a consistent structure for the essays. After establishing the importance of the topic under consideration, each essay provides background on the current situation and suggests policy changes that would produce improvements. The essays are designed for easy reading, with summaries and recommendations positioned at the start.

I proposed the topics of the essays and I developed 10 principles to guide the analytical work. My thoughts, of course, were guided by reflecting on the conversations that had occurred in Taskforce meetings. The guiding principles were:

1. Respect fiscal constraint
2. Promote economic growth
3. Use government funds efficiently
4. Fairness: Encourage cultural diversity
5. Fairness: Ensure access for all to high-quality early childhood education services
6. Encourage parental connections to the paid workforce
7. Create a predictable environment for service providers
8. Pursue administrative simplicity and low compliance costs
9. Encourage sector collaboration
10. Promote innovation across the sector

The essays on policy design were mostly drafted by the Secretariat, with extensive input being given by Taskforce members. There were some exceptions. For example, I produced the first draft of the essay on reforming funding mechanisms, Anne Smith offered very significant input into the essay on *Te Whāriki*, and Aroaro Tamati did much of the drafting for the essay on access for all children. As the drafting work developed and our conversations in the Taskforce continued, there was some fluidity about the essay topics, with some initial essays being combined, and new essay topics being added.

Two particular moments in the development of the report stand out for me. First, at one of our meetings, a Taskforce member questioned the merit of having the initial drafting work on the essays performed by the Secretariat. The argument was made that Taskforce members should be more in control of the writing. The debate ultimately fizzled out, for quite a practical reason. When I put it to the group that we needed to draft recommendations on a specific topic, we spent 90 minutes talking, and writing on a whiteboard without making much progress. This is when I emphasized that we, as Taskforce members, could

move things along much more rapidly by receiving initial drafts from the Secretariat and then extensively revising them. That approach to writing the report went very well, although it meant the Secretariat members lived in a constant state of redrafting for several months.

The second moment that stands out for me came later in the writing process. There was a week in March when all members of the Taskforce were asked to review all the draft essays and provide suggestions for revision using comments and the track changes function in Word. The result was a massive pile of work for the Secretariat, with eleven essays, each containing up to nine sets of tracked comments in them. This was messy, but it also meant that the final document fairly reflected the collective wisdom and will of the Taskforce members. There were, of course, many subsequent revisions even after that marathon effort.

The legacy

At our first meeting in October 2010, we spent some time introducing ourselves to each other, reviewing our Terms of Reference, and discussing the task ahead. After a few hours of this, I suggested an exercise. First, I shared the text of an inscription found at the start of Twin Oak Drive in Auckland’s Cornwall Park. It talks of the legacy that is left for future generations by those who plant trees for today. Second, I talked about how inspiring I had found Marian Wright Edelman’s *The measure of our success: A letter to my Children and yours* (1992). Third, I introduced a quotation attributed to Pierre de Chardin: ‘The future belongs to those who give the next generation reason for hope’.

Then I set a challenge: In small groups ask, ‘What is the letter we would most like to write to the children of Aotearoa New Zealand?’ Write it. While I knew I was taking a big risk in setting this exercise, it served to lighten the tone of the day and get people working together. This was the start of a bonding process. We established a free-wheeling and fun way of working together that also had a lot of focus to it and a very serious point. Through this exercise, we created a first draft of a poem. We also changed from nine individuals into a cohesive group, exhibiting a lot of team spirit and a desire to do great work together. Aroaro Tamati and I subsequently refined the draft poem.

The sentiments expressed in our Taskforce poem capture the importance we placed on encouraging young people, and giving them the support they need to grow and thrive in the world. Over the months to come, our work together was difficult at times. We had a lot of evidence to consider, a lot of analysis to interpret, and different views that needed to be rigorously explored and tested against each other. Often we did our work in the evenings, after the work day and when our children were sleeping. We devoted many weekends to the Taskforce. Our day-long group meetings tended to be dominated by discussion of points of difference, rather than our many points of agreement.

In the midst of all of this, it was important for us to have our poem, which reminded us of our shared commitments to the youngest citizens of this country, and those who are

not yet born. The poem, then, became a navigational marker on our journey, and it ultimately served as the dedication in *An agenda for amazing children*.

Towards a strong, unified sector

The quality of early childhood education in any country can never exceed the quality of the teachers and leaders within that sector. That is why the Taskforce on Early Childhood Education emphasized the importance of continuous improvement in how services work with children, families, and communities. Continuous improvement can be driven in a number of ways. Among other things, we proposed that government funding be allocated in ways that reward services for improving the quality of their teachers, for operating in communities of highest need, and for reducing barriers to participation by all children. We also placed significant emphasis on the importance of services working with parents to support them in their parenting activities, and to make it easier for them to balance family life with engagement in the paid workforce or training.

Parents need good information to make appropriate choices among the services they use. This is why we also proposed that user-friendly information be made more widely available to parents so that as many as possible have accurate knowledge of the kinds of services available for them and their children adjacent to where they live or where they work. When parents are knowledgeable about service quality, this increases the incentives on services to perform at their best and seek to keep getting better.

With respect to teacher preparation and professional development, we proposed a range of measures that, if adopted, would serve to promote greater consistency in the training of teachers and encourage the emergence of well-designed leadership programmes for those wishing to shape the direction of specific centres, services, or other organisations in the sector. Because we believe that peer-to-peer learning in natural settings can powerfully influence good practice, we placed emphasis on effective dissemination of proven innovations across the sector. Creating formal mechanisms for allowing professionals in the sector to interact frequently and learn from each other can do a lot to promote informal networks that can further enhance people's professional development. Taken together, I believe the adoption of these measures to enhance service quality and promote professional development would support the growth of a stronger, more unified sector.

Conclusion

An agenda for amazing children has articulated the view that funding appropriate, high-quality early childhood education for every young child in New Zealand represents the most important and highest-yielding investment that we could make as a nation. That view was unanimously shared



The EC Taskforce: Aroaro Tamati, Ron Viviani, Lorraine Tafa, Claire Johnstone, Tanya Harvey, Michael Mintrom, Richie Poulter, Peter Reynolds, and Anne Smith

by the members of the Taskforce on Early Childhood Education, and it is a view that has been strongly supported by stakeholders in the sector and by others.

I am delighted that, as a group, the Taskforce produced a powerful statement promoting greater investment into this area of social activity. I am also delighted that, as a diverse group of professionals, we came through the process with a high level of mutual respect for each other, interpersonal goodwill, and a collective sense that we were engaging in important work. It was a wonderful privilege to lead the Taskforce.

My hope now is that leaders in the sector will pick up where we have left off. Amazing children and great families represent the foundations of a great society. That means accessible, high-quality early childhood education for all children is central to nation-building. When leaders in early childhood education work together and make strong arguments on behalf of our youngest citizens, they serve as nation-builders. Wisely directed, their efforts over the coming years will create significant opportunities for this country, and every member of our society. That is an exciting prospect.

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Tara Fagan is a facilitator with CORE Education and is based in Wellington. She is passionate about using ICT to support teaching and learning, and enjoys sharing this knowledge with others.

Annika Fry is an e.c. teacher nearing completion of her provisional teacher registration. She studied down at Otago University and earned a Bachelor's degree in teaching and learning before moving to Wellington where she now teaches at CityKids.

Ann Hatherly currently works for CORE Education where she is a National Team Leader for the Early Years Facilitator Team. Ann began her career in education as a kindergarten teacher and went on to become a senior lecturer in pre-service teacher education at Auckland College of Education (now University of Auckland) in the 1990s. It was during this time that she first became involved in professional development (PD) funded by the Ministry of Education (MoE). In 2000 she joined Educational Leadership Project, and in 2006 CORE Education where she led the design and development of the ECE ICT Professional Learning Programme until 2009. CORE Education is engaged in the current MoE-funded contracts and also operates private PD consultancy for ECE centres and schools throughout New Zealand.

Hayley Mathieson is a North Shore-based early childhood educator with seven years experience in Auckland e.c. centres. She is passionate about educators learning professionally to improve their practice.

Anne Meade is an education consultant specialising in early childhood education. Anne is currently coordinating the Early Childhood Teachers' Work Research Project for Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa/ NZ Childcare Association.

Michael Mintrom is an associate professor and founding coordinator of the Master of Public Policy degree at the University of Auckland. His books include: *Policy entrepreneurs and school choice* (2000), *People skills for policy analysts* (2003), *Contemporary policy analysis* (2011), and an edited volume, *Political leadership in New Zealand* (2006). Starting in 2012, he will take up an appointment as Professor of Public Sector Management at the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, based in Melbourne.

Lorraine Sands headed the Centre of Innovation project at Greerton Early Childhood Centre focused on enquiry based learning. Lorraine is part of the Educational Leadership Project team supporting teachers in NZ and beyond in their professional learning journeys. There is a strong action research focus in this work as teachers openly explore learning and teaching initiatives in their own settings.

Louise Taylor works for CORE Education as an early years facilitator in the Auckland area. Louise has worked in education for over thirty years, training as a teacher in the 1970s. Over the past 15 years she has worked in professional learning, completing a PhD on this in 2007. Louise loves living in West Auckland, where she grew up. She has three adult children.

Barbara Watson has worked in a number of roles within the early childhood and primary sectors ranging from teacher to centre owner/manager. In her current role as a professional learning facilitator she works with teams of teachers in whole-centre programmes and also facilitates the mentoring programme for EC Professional Support at the University of Auckland. Barbara has recently begun her doctoral studies with a focus on mentoring in the education and care sector.

Bridgit Williams is a professional learning facilitator and mentor with EC Professional Support at The University of Auckland. Her work involves supporting teachers in a diverse range of ECE services to improve and enhance teaching capability with a view to improving learning outcomes for children. She has taught in private and community based centres, as well as in the role of early intervention teacher and hospital play specialist. Bridgit is currently completing studies toward a Masters of Professional Studies in Education.



Upcoming Special Issue
'Professionalism in early childhood education'

Guest Editor: Carmen Dalli

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