

# TEACHERS AS POWERFUL LEARNERS



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Pedagogy, Positivity, Passion and Participation are all part of effective professional learning for ECE teachers, writes WENDY LEE

At the heart of all that we do in the early childhood education sector in New Zealand, and have done in the past decade, is *Te Whāriki*. This curriculum document is enormously valued in our country as well as well beyond our shores. In this invited paper I want to focus on the principles of *Te Whāriki* in relation to some key ideas and strategies for sustained and effective professional development. This is because this curriculum is as relevant for the adults in our settings as it is for the children.

There is an increasing understanding of the complex nature of all education work, and the importance of teachers' engagement in deep and sustained improvement has long been recognised by New Zealand governments. Today our professional development policies, underpinned by *Te Whāriki*, are the envy of many throughout the world.

The four key professional learning ideas linked to *Te Whāriki* are:

- **Holism:** Participants' passions are nurtured in a setting that recognises the holistic nature of learning and research.
- **Empowerment:** Each participant is encouraged to take an active and positive role in their learning and research, to own issues and to create solutions.
- **Relationships:** Pedagogical relationships promote close collaboration and reflection in a safe environment.
- **Community:** Value is placed on the participation of everyone in the wider community. Issues of social justice and democracy are integral.

## HOLISM AND PASSION

Nurturing teachers' passions in a setting that takes account of the holistic nature of learning and teaching is vital for professional



development. Most of us spend more time with the adults and children we work with than with those we love most in our lives – our partners, our husbands, our children and our best friends. Given this reality, it is vital that we create learning spaces that nurture everyone. The foundation of effective and sustained professional development is a strong and positive organisational culture. People may forget what you say to them, but they never forget how you make them feel.

One of the key strategies we have used to develop this sense of belonging and collegiality is to connect the 'Fish Philosophy' with *Te Whāriki*. John Yokoyama developed the Fish Philosophy as an organisational culture in his place of work, a fish market (Yokoyama and Michelli 2004). It led to greatly increased employee morale and this energised the work environment. This philosophy (Crother et al 2004, Lundin 2000) has a strong resonance with *Te Whāriki*. People are drawn to the enthusiasm, passion and energy of others. It has been our experience that teachers want to participate in professional development that promotes teacher innovation, persistence, and celebration. Kent Peterson and Terrence Deal (1998, p. 29) illustrate this aspect of organisational culture when they

describe staff who "have a shared sense of purpose – where they pour their hearts into the children and their teaching... where the informal network of storytellers, heroes and heroines provides a social web of positive information support and history".

## EMPOWERMENT AND POSITIVITY

Positivity encourages each participant to take an active role in their learning and research, and to own issues and create solutions. One of the critical aspects of successful professional learning is to take a credit rather than a deficit approach in order to support the learning repertoires and dispositions of children and adults. For example, Bishop et al (2003, p. 22) state that: "If the image we hold for Māori children or indeed any children...is one of deficits, then our principles and practices will reflect this, and we will thereby perpetuate the education crisis."

In our view, effective professional development asks teachers to focus on their strengths and passions and build a strong and positive culture of learning in their place of work based on these.

Positivity is also encouraged by focusing on a research question. This is an area where the team wishes to make improvements and develop their strengths.

Manageable and interesting action-based research projects have proved to be a powerful professional development strategy.

## RELATIONSHIPS AND PEDAGOGY

The pedagogy of relationships involves promoting close collaboration and reflection in a safe environment. In the words of Vivian Gussin Paley: "Any classroom – I know the kindergarten best – should develop into a close-knit community of people who care deeply about each other." Sustained professional development has built strong, resourceful, provocative, challenging – and caring – environments; not only for children but for adults as well. Professional development is not just a matter of describing or modelling 'good practice'. There is a considerable element of trust and confidence needed before teachers are prepared to question their thinking, to risk failure, and to make significant changes. Professional development strategies that work to strengthen these attitudes include networking opportunities, encouraging teacher exchanges and visiting other centres.

The concept of the project facilitator becoming a critical friend of the teachers in a centre or setting is also a key element of professional development. A project facilitator who works as a critical friend has established a strong respectful and reciprocal relationship over time. Visits from the project facilitator are fabulous learning strategies when time is given to observing the programme, modelling practice (e.g. writing learning stories), talking to staff (sometimes individually) and working alongside the teachers.

The provision of 'retreats', wherein staff take time out from the busy life of teaching in a centre and spend time in dialogue with other teachers is also a

TABLE : FOUR ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION IN ECE SETTING

Principles of <i>Te Whāriki</i>	Holistic	Empowerment	Relationships	Community
Elements	Passion	Positivity	Pedagogy	Participation
	Passion: nurture participants' passions in a setting that takes account of the holistic nature of learning and research.	Positivity, encourage each participant to take an active role in their learning and research, to own issues and to create solutions.	Pedagogy of relationships: promoting close collaboration and reflection in a safe environment.	Politics: place value on everyone in the wider community being involved. Nurturing democracy and issues of justice.
In practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Holistic</li> <li>Powerful culture</li> <li>Playfulness</li> <li>Kindness</li> <li>Strong centre culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on strengths and interests</li> <li>Competent learners</li> <li>Puzzling over uncertainty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deep listening</li> <li>Relationships</li> <li>Critical friends</li> <li>Community of learners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advocacy</li> <li>Leadership</li> <li>Making a difference</li> <li>Involving everyone in the PD</li> </ul>
Professional development strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing the culture of the place</li> <li>Four simple strategies linked to the principles of <i>Te Whāriki</i> (Play, Be There, Choose your attitude and Make a Difference)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Setting own research focus or project focus</li> <li>Starting from a strength base</li> <li>Writing journals and learning logs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Retreats</li> <li>Networking</li> <li>Teacher 'swap'</li> <li>Visiting centres</li> <li>InCentre visits (strength of relationship with PF)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sharing and contributing work at workshops</li> <li>Involving the wider community</li> <li>Articulating your practice</li> <li>End of year presentation</li> </ul>

powerful component of effective professional development. Carlina Rinaldi, President of Reggio Children, refers to the notion of "transformational dialogue", providing an opportunity for these discussions and debates to transform relationships and in turn transform both the identity of the individuals and the wider group.

#### COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPATION

Being able to advocate for children and families, and to articulate viewpoints and theoretical ideas about teaching and learning are features of a professional educator and strong pedagogical practice; professional development should also pay attention to this aspect of the work.

Workshops can open up opportunities for teachers to find their voice and for centre facilitators/lead teachers to become effective leaders of the professional development in their settings. Some of the key ideas that might be covered in such workshops could include: examining leadership, team building, adult learning, facilitation of groups; exploring the formulation of focus areas and research questions for professional education; developing an understanding and use of action research methods; establishing professional learning communities; building strong and positive learning cultures; debating assessment for learning issues; evaluating and reflecting on professional development progress and issues within the centre. All teachers are given an

opportunity to share their work and to articulate their practice. These are valuable opportunities for strengthening the early childhood sector and sustaining the professional development.

End-of-year presentations have also facilitated participation. At the end of the project year, we hold a forum for centre facilitators and their teams to present their journey and outcomes of the year's work. This is an exciting, challenging and rewarding time for all those who are involved in professional development. It is a celebration of the year's work and a chance to share successes, learn from others and to develop deeper participation in the early childhood community.

#### CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

I have focused on just four elements of successful professional education in an early childhood setting. These are summarised in the table above. I am continuously excited by the passion and commitment that early childhood teachers make to their ongoing learning in an effort to strive to be the best they can be for children and families in their communities.

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