

Self Review - questioning our practice through thoughtful investigation

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It seems to me that Self Review is what thinking teachers do every day. In effect it is 'the road we're travelling' as we focus on aspects of our practice that we want to understand and grow. A process, in fact, that enables us to clarify our thoughts and articulate our learning and teaching; not as teachers working alone but as a cohesive teaching and learning team, able to unpack what our vision means in practice.

We're looking for a way to be in sync with each other, skilfully, imaginatively, powerfully; knowing full well, exactly what it is that makes a difference to children's learning in 'our place'.

The journey needs a vehicle, a way of taking this thoughtful gaze and giving it a focussed context. Action Research helps us do this. When teams set a reflective question and methodically go about the task of answering it, they explore together aspects of their practice that are vital to building a more vibrant learning community. When we see ourselves as researchers, we are much more likely to question our taken-for-granted assumptions, put a magnifying glass over our learning and teaching and map the journey. The Principles of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) are a call to wise practice. Yet, we decide how that whāriki is designed and we do this best when we form strong learning partnerships with our communities. Perhaps a way in is to ask ourselves what we think our core job is – the driving force that is essential to each and every moment of our teaching and learning day? John Holt (1965) will tell you this:

Since we cannot know what knowledge will be needed in the future, it is senseless to try to teach it in advance. Instead, our job must be to turn out young people who love learning so much, and who learn so well, that they will be able to learn whatever needs to be learned.

These are the kind of words that have no "recipe-ed" format, no tick-the-box-programme. This is the kind of vision that positions teachers as life long learners too, researchers making thoughtful decisions about the way forward, based on deep connections with their learning community.

Te Whatu Pōkeka

Wrapping our settings around children



Te Whatu Pōkeka (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009) uses a visionary metaphor for wise learning and teaching cultures. This document uses the traditional Māori blanket, made with harakeke and albatross feathers for strength and warmth, to illustrate shifting the focus to the individual child. In this way, the shape of the programme is moulded around the child, rather than the other way round. Teachers who stay alert to children's intentions become intentional teachers.

How can we make this happen? Well, not by chance, because focussing on learning outcomes is in our 'teaching gene pool' (Robinson, 2010). This is a provocative video clip by Sir Ken Robinson around 21st century learning. This kind of thinking has had a huge influence on my understanding about what valued learning and teaching looks like. In Aotearoa, New Zealand the Principles that drive us are bound inside Te Whāriki. This is our mandated curriculum and wherever we are inside the diversity that has characterised early childhood settings here, those Principles and Strands must be visible in our practice. The Education Review Office expects teachers to be able to articulate what they do in terms of these Principles and every other philosophical position must be woven into this fabric. This means we are professionally and articulately explaining our practice, documenting this so that our community is drawn into what 'we do here' and 'how we make a difference to children's learning'. The Self Review process when viewed from this perspective is

worth getting excited about because teams make shifts in practice based on the Principles of Te Whāriki that have long term effects on children's identities of themselves as confident, capable learners.

Disrupting conventional thinking!

Self Review, through Action Research, is a way to disrupt our conventional thinking. The spot where we focus the magnifying glass gets a little too hot, as it were, and our whole team begins the conversations that take us beyond the ordinary. The data we collect as teacher researchers must be something we do every day so we stay true to the notion of working smarter, not harder – working from contextualised reflection, not generalised observation. One thoughtfully written Learning Story, analysed well, written from a dispositional frame, with skills woven into the fabric of the story, does just this. I say 'thoughtfully written' Learning Story because, sadly, there are settings where the joy and life has been sucked out of these, by using old paradigms, old observational frameworks, that for all intents and purposes have remained static, with just a name change. This is far from the dynamic, engaged vision of Margaret Carr (2001), when she conceived a socio cultural narrative that could give life to the puzzling enquiry of children and adults working together in collaborative learning communities.

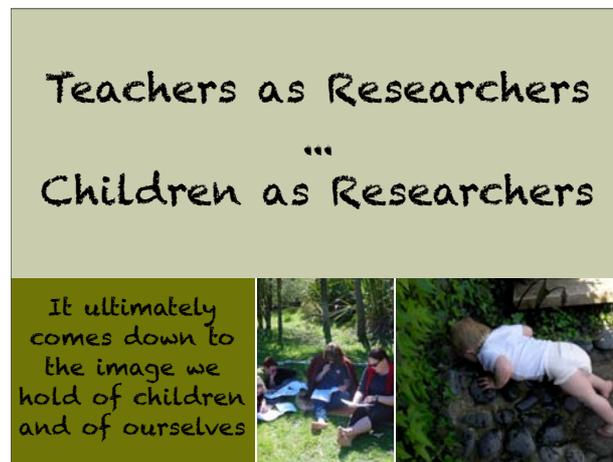
We must put life into our stories, with emotion and passion, and they will become a valued treasure, loved by children, families and teachers. They will reveal the vibrancy of children's learning, within a context of learning and teaching imbued with life and meaning. If you are in any doubt about this, check whether children introduce themselves to strangers with their portfolio in their hands, whether children are immersed in small groups sharing their stories with their friends, whether they take these books home because they are their favourite bed time story. Teachers who write thoughtful Learning Stories work in an holistic, engaging way that has a 360 dimensional aspect to it. They *embed* their reflections into the context of children's learning. Over time, what better way to reveal yourself as a thoughtful, engaged teacher, fulfilling every conceivable professional criteria, working smarter, not harder, working with passion, commitment and courage? This sounds like 21st century learning to me.

The Greerton teachers in their Centre of Innovation Research (2006-2008) had this to say (Greerton, 2010):

In the 21st century, it will be essential for all learners to have the sensitivity and inclination to respond to learning in different situations. As we have come to understand this, we have tried to embed into our practice ways to actively seek edgy learning situations that require us to struggle with uncertainty and doubt, and to be comfortable with doing this.

John Bennet situates this with such strength of character when he says:

The early childhood centre is viewed as a life space, a place in which children and pedagogues "learn to be, learn to do, learn to learn, learn to be together".



It ultimately comes down to the image we hold of ourselves as teachers. Here is a small excerpt from the Greerton COI Research Project (2006-2008).

This is a finely balanced role, an intuitive role that sees each teacher making decisions "in the moment" poised as provocateur, as listener, as learner, as teacher, ever vigilant for opportunities to widen and deepen knowledge, on that knife edge that draws children into mystery, as 'a crew member, not a passenger' (Claxton, 2002). It is a highly skilled position and one that can enhance and constrain learning in the blink of an eye. (Greerton, 2010)

Self Review could best be described as understanding what enhances learning in your place.

Considered investigation helps make your place a vibrant, intriguing, learning and teaching environment, full of possibility for puzzling enquiry, where children build theories about the world, explore these and then adapt them for their own purposes. Self Review shifts us from individual teachers making a difference to children's learning – and our own learning through respectful/responsive engagement – towards an understanding of how the culture we have built in our own settings contributes to children's identities as life long learners. As we deepen our understanding it supports children's abilities to pursue, in depth, the things that interest them over time.

This is why dispositional frames for learning communities are so important. As soon as we become didactic, teaching the things we think are important, we

fall into that banking model of education that Paulo Friere (2007) disparages so much. When we attempt to 'fill children up with knowledge' we are closing doors and narrowing possibilities. When we slice and dice their day into "curriculum fragments" (Hill, 2001) we deny the time and space children need to go beyond the superficial, into complex thinking and doing that are the hallmarks of engaged, switched on learners. And when we direct children to "do this, go there, sit still, be quiet", we are very likely disengaging them from the business of being intrinsically motivated, self directed learners who care deeply about exploring the meaningful, the so very interesting, very often difficult puzzles, they set themselves.

Starting Self Review ... Oh, but I'm erring here on the side of deficit, and the last thing I would suggest is to set a Self Review research question around something we don't do well. That is a recipe for teacher disengagement. If we think that staying in a credit space with children is wise teaching and learning practice, then it certainly is a principle that works for adults. Credit doesn't mean staying in safe, easy places. Anyone watching children "in the zone" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) will know that they set themselves difficult, tricky goals that push them to the edge of their skill sets. It's a very different feeling to have to work on something you know you aren't good at, particularly if someone else is telling you, *you have to*, compared with following something you intuitively know you do well and exploring this deeply, so you are able to understand and articulate what makes it work. Here is the most likely place for you to lift your expectations and push through barriers to get even better. It is in this process that difficult things become easier, simply because you are putting in the time, energy and thoughtful engagement, in other words practicing, to get better. This somehow changes our views about other difficult, edgy things. We are more likely to see making mistakes as a way to learn and develop a growth mindset (Carol Dweck, 2006), where we keep pushing those boundaries out further. This is the place to start a Self Review process.

The good news is that Self Review works most effectively when you do this in your teams with a commitment to shared leadership. Wise managers do not tell you what you *need* to work on. That 'need' word will immediately put you all into a tail spin of compliance, the worst place for an engaged teacher to be. In deciding on which area to focus a Self Review/Action Research question, we need first to think about children's interests. You might like to skip to Appendix 1 and read the Learning Story for Josh to see what kinds of research questions come out of this narrative reflection. This is where your passion will be driven from: not from a generalised observation, but from the gritty, the gutsy business of children's learning, in the context of that

learning, embedded in a thoughtfully written narrative. It is all about finding the magic (Lee, 2011) - the thing that captures you and your team's imagination and exploring this deeply, widely, enthusiastically. In this way too, you will be doing the smarter not harder work, as you utilise this documentation for a range of purposes.

The Learning Story written by Karen Hose (Appendix 2) is the kind of thoughtful reflection that can be duplicated for Teacher's Registration Criteria, Staff Appraisal and, of course, stimulate animated discussion when read at Team Planning meetings.

Self Review happens best when teams set a research question that is meaningful to them. The next task is to gather documentation to track your progress. When you use your thoughtfully written Learning Stories, reflection is embedded in them, so there is no need to write additional comments. You don't have to be burdened by extra 'stuff' that will just sit in a cupboard!

My reasons for saying we do not need additional reflections centres on the power of those reflections. As you explore and analyse learning under headings like: "*What did I learn about Josh today? How can we grow this learning further?*" you draw families into a view of what valued learning looks like. We have a small window of opportunity to nurture children's identities as life long learners. It is their parents, their families/whanau that will be their life long advocates, and teachers have an ethical responsibility to let families into their perceptions of what wise learning and teaching might look like. This is never a top down, power over, model. Children arrive at our settings with very large 'back packs' and families who care deeply about them. They come with cultures and experiences that say this is 'me'. We must be listening ever so intently so we really know our children and families. Reflective stories widen families' appreciation of valued learning; learning that leads to life long success. They grow partnership in this process, strengthened through working together, listening, sharing, experiencing.

You will have to organise this documentation and additional reflective questions inside your Self Review folders. They will act like sign posts mapping your intent and journey. Things like: *'How did it all start? How was this interest, enquiry sustained? What surprised us? How have we changed? How are dispositions embedded into the fabric of the way we teach and learn?'*

Guy Claxton is one of my learning heroes. He so wisely says (2001):

Good learners do not always learn fast! The ability to hang out in the fog, to tolerate confusion, to dare to wait in a state of incomprehension while the

glimmering of an idea takes its time to form is another aspect of resilience and thus of learning power.



Maybe this is a way to see Self Review, for where there are questions answered, more questions will be asked. Self Review represents a journey into *learning for life*, simmering away inside the conversations you have each day. These are drawn together into a communal space through your Action Research journal, where they are revisited, re-worked and reflected on, emerging as powerful practice, understood by everyone in your team and in your community. This is a challenge worth pursuing.

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So how do you roll the wet sand into a road? Josh came up with the perfect solution as he sized up the potential of the trapeze swing.

As I watched his work I couldn't help thinking how imaginative his solution was. He took both ends of the swing which now formed a triangle and attached this to the hook on the truck. Driving up and over the piled sand had exactly the desired effect as the humps and hollows were rolled into shape by the swing bar.



Opportunities and Possibilities. Josh immerses himself in these kinds of problems to solve. Real problems brought about by experience. Research tells us that learners who can take knowledge from one context and use it creatively in another are using working theories. Josh you learn so much as you investigate and experiment with real things.

Harriet's plan foiled!



Teacher: Karen Hose

We have recently bought a range of new equipment. One of these items was a series of wooden stacking boxes, all brightly coloured. I spied Harriet holding the set, tightly packed inside each other. She was curious about the graduating sequence of ridges made by each box, and seemed to realise that by pulling on the ridged edge, it would reveal the box's surprise. It seemed the boxes had little movement when stacked in this way. It was my impression she was trying to pull out a box.

While Harriet was completely at ease and still focused, I in my enthusiasm for her to discover the six boxes hiding within, helped her to retrieve a box. Harriet looked up and didn't seem to find my interference helpful or amazing.

Now that was my clue to stop, but with complete unawareness of the moment, I thought by revealing the other boxes, I would capture her attention.

Up to this point Harriet had been intent on discovery, while I was intent on overloading her with my vision, and thus totally spoiling the 'unknown' for her.

Harriet picked up the box, gave it a cursory glance, dropped it and moved off. She did however stop and looked back with a scornful expression, which said it all.... "yeah! good one Karen."

I certainly felt the weight of my interference, falling squarely on my shoulders and gained the knowledge that she wouldn't be inviting me to the movies in the future, in fear I would reveal the endings.

Now it seemed the universe came together to reinforce this learning moment, for as I sat at morning tea, staring back at me was an article by Alison Gopnik, a professor of psychology, titled 'Your baby is smarter than you think!'

I'm sure Harriet would agree. While she was captivated by the unexpected, I was focused on outcomes. Alison Gopnik in her article highlighted recent experiments where children left to spontaneously play with a toy, figure out how it works. By playing in this way, she suggests babies and infants are exploring cause and effect. Harriet so clearly illustrated Alison Gopnik's research to me, that when children are shown how a toy works, they are less interested in exploring it. **"Very young children, imagine and explore a vast array of possibilities."** (Alison Gopnik) It is very important for Harriet to be given the time and space to investigate for herself, to make her own discoveries. She is naturally drawn to the new and unexpected. Harriet doesn't rely on what she knows as I did, but interacts and investigates her world with the goal of being informed. By exploring her world in this way, Harriet will be shaping flexible and open mind habits. It's from these early childhood experiences where her future attitudes to learning will be shaped. We view our environment here as a provocateur which stimulates Harriet's interests, creates questions for her, encouraging mindful investigations. **"Babies explore; adults exploit."**

Harriet reinforced to me, that she is capable and in control of her learning, and I should be mindful, intuitively aware of her exploration, as we interact together.