

## Preface

This research recognizes that we live in a postmodern era where knowledge is characterized by “unruliness” (Stronach and Maclure, 1997, p.98), and perceived as the ability to perform or act effectively (Lyotard, Kvale). Unlike forms of research that seek to consolidate meaning and identify patterns that can be generalized across populations, this research recognizes that in times of rapid, dynamic, unpredictable change it is important for all professional educators to be adaptable, to be informed of options, and to be selective in choosing appropriate actions: no longer are we guided by rules established by previous generations; no longer can we ‘arrest’ or ‘freeze’ the truth, or delay action until consensus is reached. Through its focus on knowledge that is generated collectively, this research addresses the complexity of meaning as we are coming to understand it.

Postmodern deconstruction must *address* rather than *arrest* the ‘mobilisation’ of meaning in educational policy, and attend to the *uncertain trajectories* of meanings in contemporary times. (Stronach and Maclure, 1997: 97, italics added)

The research shows that teachers and researchers, working in a learning community (early childhood education in this case), can utilize prior theoretical understandings, united with fresh observations, questions, reflections and experiments, to arrive at new knowledge which both arises out of and is integrated with practice in that community. This insight and integration was underpinned by a specific approach to data gathering, analysis and collective knowledge construction (in this case, coming to understand through sharing learning stories).

Artificial boundaries between theory and practice are broken down in ways that point to exciting future possibilities for professional praxis.

The methodological backdrop to this research is built upon approaches to collective practitioner research described in Mayo (2003). It relies upon post-structural, critical and neo-pragmatic theory, and is informed by complexity theory from the new sciences (Wheatley, 1999). Though some reference is made to these theoretical abstractions throughout the report, above all, this research tells stories about the experiences and insights of children, teachers and parents working at the New Beginning Preschool, in Christchurch, New Zealand, between 2002 and 2006.

This report provides an example of how postmodern approaches to research can be embedded in the everyday lives of teachers who are growing in their understandings of themselves and the communities in which they work. By viewing the teacher as a member of a team, which, collectively, seeks to investigate particular aspects of individual and collective practice, this research shows how new knowledge can be constructed socially and collectively.

Social constructionism is counterintuitive ... with regard to our notions of personhood this means that the very idea that we exist as separate, discrete individuals, that our emotions are personal, spontaneous expressions of an inner self we call personality is fundamentally questioned. (Burr, 1995, p. 17)

This research demonstrates the kind of sharing of knowledge within a community that Saul (2001) refers to as integrated thought, something, which enables each individual in the group to act intelligently, sensibly, and confidently – something that is sadly lacking in workplaces.

What prevents us from acting as if we were ... intelligent is our unwillingness to insist on integrated thought – that is to act as if we shared knowledge with others in society. (Saul, 2001, p. 64)

The teacher researchers in this study have built on existing theory to develop working models, which guide their praxis (see, for example, the description of New Beginnings Preschool Framework in chapter 3). When such clearly articulated understandings are embedded in the culture of a community, the community develops a the resilience of a community of practice which, as Schalager and Fusco (2002) point out, links practitioners, providers and researchers; it is able to grow, evolve, and reproduce its membership; community members take on multiple roles such as broker, moderator, mentor and learner in different contexts. They argue that:

... a community of practice is not just another term used to convey a sense of professional kinship or shared interest; it is an integral, evolving identity that spans stakeholder groups within a school system. (Schalager and Fusco, 2002, p. 217)

The exciting feature of this community is that the teachers themselves take on the role of researchers. This means that the processes developed within this project are likely to continue: the notion of teacher as researcher within community is firmly embedded as an ongoing model for professional growth – the quotations from teacher researchers at the start of each chapter give some hint of the impact of this project on their self esteem, their competence as educators, and their collective intelligence as they work with children and their parents.

This research demonstrates an approach to knowledge construction that is based on the idea that “societal systems have no goals to be achieved, rather they have relations to be maintained” (Skyttner, 1996, p. 248). Insights from complexity theory (although not described as such, in practice) allowed the teacher researchers at New Beginnings Preschool to look holistically at their work and to call on theory developed by others if and when it seemed appropriate. The shared methodological knowledge of this community has been summarised in four ways within this report (see the sections highlighted in grey throughout the document): “influences” point to literature which has been fundamental in guiding guided collective thinking and action; “supporting literature” point to literature where the ideas resonate because of their similarity to findings of this

community; “research processes” describe how data have been gathered and analysed in order to address specific questions or needs; “findings” report on theory the teacher researchers have developed and incorporated into their practice. These four constructs, taken together, provide an approach to collective knowledge construction that could well have wide implications for future professional learning within educational settings.

A current challenge for the education system is to move beyond deficit theories where the cause of social problems is deemed to lie with the individual, toward more holistic approaches where the focus is on relationships among individuals and patterns of communication within communities. The need is for a shift from dominant psychological approaches to research, which focuses on the individual to more holistic approaches, which consider the complexity of lived experience where theory can, at best, provide us with insight into how to act in the light of new challenges.

Complexity theory points out that social problems (appropriately called *wicked problems* by some) are never solved, at best they are only resolved - over and over again (Skyttner, 1996, p. 248). This insight suggests that educational research within educational settings needs to transcend the classical methods of the social sciences which seek theories about best practice: an important new focus for educational research is find ways to enable the *wicked problems* of teaching, including day-to-day problems, to be addressed by teacher researchers, *in situ*, and for those findings to be documented and disseminated in ways that impact on policy.

The centres of innovation research at New Beginnings Preschool provides insights into how schools, early childhood institutions, and, indeed, tertiary institutions might develop as learning communities where *wicked problems* are addressed collectively within local educational settings.

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## Overview of chapters and layout

### **Chapter 1: Introduction: Community, context and research**

New Beginnings Preschool is one of six New Zealand early childhood centres participating in the first round of the Ministry of Education's Centres of Innovation three-year research project. The hallmark of this research programme is action research led by participant teacher researchers. Throughout the project the teaching team at New Beginnings Preschool worked in partnership with a research associate to explore the ways in which visual arts and project work in the curriculum contributed to building a community of learners in this early childhood environment. Significant outcomes of the research include new understandings of the construction of identity, both individual and collective, within the Preschool community.

This chapter gives details of all the strands of the community within and about which this research took place. It introduces background from theory (and other contextual factors). Finally, it presents the three innovations we investigated, and explains our approach to emerging data.

### **Chapter 2: “Who are we?” : Individual identity**

This chapter presents findings that illustrate the strengthening of individual identity for members of our community: teachers, parents/whanau and children. In the first section of this chapter, we describe how understandings about parent identity emerged from insights gained through a parent survey. Parental perspectives strongly influenced the teacher researchers' view of their parent community and as a result parents became valued and acknowledged as individuals rather than seen as a group of people with common characteristics. The second section of this chapter tells how teachers brought the notion of individual identity (child, parent and teacher) into current learning and teaching documentation practices and, in so doing, strengthened their understandings of socio-cultural learning theory. The concluding section describes the emergence of an identity of individuals in this learning community as co-learners; adults and children sharing the roles of teacher and learner. This understanding emerged as teachers firstly questioned difference in pedagogical approaches in visual art. Through developing teacher confidence and capability in working in visual art with children, teachers gained a positive view of themselves as learners in this domain and community participation in visual art strengthened. One teacher's story is shared as an example of the process teachers experienced in coming to know oneself as a learner and teacher. The outcome of this area of exploration is presented as a framework that describes the image of a co-learner in visual art. The identity of the co-learner is described as:

An explorer,  
An achiever,  
A participator, facilitator, contributor,  
A dreamer and player, and  
A communicator.

### **Chapter 3: “Doing the hard work”: Relationships**

This chapter explores the ‘hard work’ or intentional aspects of being a teacher in a community of learners as teachers develop practices to promote closer relationships with parents. As these relationships develop, dialogue becomes easier and more prevalent in the centre. The chapter tells the story of the teachers’ journey of building parental participation in children’s learning, from the realization that dialogue means two-way communication to establishing practices where mutual communication becomes an expectation within the community. Children’s on-going learning experiences become richer and more meaningful.

Analysis of teacher and parent relationships led the research team to identify a five level framework that illustrates movement from relationships based on uni-directional information-giving to relationships of interdependence. One learning story, set in the centre’s infant and toddler context, is shared to illustrate this framework in action. This story illuminates the interrelationship of teacher/parent dialogue, developing relationships and children’s learning.

An individual teacher’s story describes how her learning about doing the ‘hard work’ is put into action, articulating an understanding of the importance of relationships (espoused) does not mean they will occur. This teacher discovered how doing (enacting) the hard work to build reciprocal and responsive relationships with one family had beneficial outcomes for her as teacher, as well as the parents, child and wider family.

### **Chapter 4: “Igniting the magic”: Community of practice identity**

This chapter describes how our Preschool community identity is developed by exploring the practices and routines, tools and artefacts, climate and culture of the centre. It demonstrates the understanding we gained of how individuals and groups within the community are shaped by and in turn shape the identity of the learning community through the practices adopted within the early childhood programme. Teacher practice is instrumental in nurturing a ‘community of learning’ identity.

In this chapter we focus on people's participation in community processes that form common practice, and how practices evolve and respond to the changing community. We explore the connection between historical cultural practices and emerging new practices as the teaching team undertake a process of re-constructing project work in the curriculum. Prior knowledge and understandings merge with new ones as the teacher researcher team experience change in the community. Our community's identity undergoes constant evolution, rather than abrupt or radical change: practices of the past continue in some form but do not necessarily remain the same.

The first section of this chapter explores the impact of change in teacher curriculum practices on community identity. The teacher researcher team reviewed and reflected on centre documentation to develop an understanding of how participation in the community is affected by change in community culture and new curriculum teaching practices. The second section explores the impact of change in community membership on centre practices as the group of over-two teachers' grapple with re-constructing their collective approach to group project work implementation during a period of staffing changes. The 'magic' of the community engaging with and participating together in learning appeared to have been lost and this team wanted to re-ignite it. A group project story is presented to illustrate how projects became re-established in the programme; however, it does not look exactly the same as before as the basis for group learning through projects shifts from a topic to an inquiry. Changes in teacher practice and learning are described and explained in relation to how participation of children, teachers and parents/whanau influenced the re-construction of practice. The final section of this chapter explores the reasons underpinning the shifts in project work practice. The critical role teacher's hold in a community of learners comes into view. Teachers were able to make effective change by taking notice of the participation of children and parents/whanau rather than focussing on the perceived needs of the teaching team.

## **Chapter 5: "A way of being": Empowerment**

This chapter posits the view that empowerment is a 'way of being' in a learning community. It is a part of the culture of the community. We described relationships in chapter 3 as the heart of a learning community. In this chapter we position empowerment as the spirit of the community.

The learning and teaching community described in this report is one that did not just naturally form when a group of people came together. The community we have described and illustrated is one that is underpinned by the principle of empowerment. Each chapter of this report has acknowledged that it is not the physical environment in which members of a community come together that contributes to building a learning community; rather this is grounded in the people, how they relate

and what they do. The curriculum areas of project work and visual art provided the research team with focus lenses through which to view the community in action as they arrived at understandings of how a learning community can be developed and nurtured. It was discovered that it is what teachers do in these areas of curriculum that differentiates between a regular early childhood place of learning from an early childhood learning community.

The concept of empowerment is familiar to the early childhood sector in New Zealand as it is one of the four principles outlined in Te Whāriki, the early childhood curriculum (1996). Te Whāriki (p. 40) describes an empowering curriculum as one that enables children to:

- Take increasing responsibility for their own learning and care
- Develop an enhanced sense of self-worth, identity, confidence and enjoyment
- Contribute their own special strengths and interests
- Learn useful and appropriate ways to find out what they want to know
- Understand their own individual ways of learning and being creative.

These valued outcomes of the early childhood curriculum are explored in this chapter as we apply the understanding of empowerment that emerged through our research project. We describe the concept of empowerment as a spirit that permeates the centre.

## **Chapter 6: Reflections on life long learning**

This research project has nurtured life long learning through the interactions of teachers, parents, and children within a learning community. Teacher practice is guided by the principles of Te Whāriki and therefore experienced as the community participates in the life of the centre.

Participation in the innovative practices of visual art and project work has contributed to learning for all participants in the centre. Ways in which learning manifests itself is not always immediately evident within the early childhood environment however; we have gained some insight into how our practices nurture the foundations for on-going learning. The story shared by a parent in this chapter provides a strong sense of how valuable participation in a community of learners can be for children and adults alike.

## *How the report is set out*

Each chapter discusses one of the four key areas that the teacher researcher team identified as needing to be nurtured in order to build a community of learning: individual identity, relationships, community of practice identity, and empowerment.

Relevant literature, influences on our thinking and research processes we used are marked by grey boxes within the text. It is possible to make sense of our story without reading these details.

- Stories provided by the participant teacher researchers are included to illustrate and give life to the concepts discussed. Extended learning stories are marked by coloured bars on the left side of the page.

- Visual art interest: readers who wish to follow the developments in visual art through this report are provided with the 'signpost' of a yellow bubble.



- Project work interest: readers who wish to follow the developments in project work through this report are provided with the 'signpost' of a blue bubble.

