

Chapter 5 - 'A way of being': Empowerment

“The research processes made me understand more about myself as well as the children. Overall, a very rewarding and beneficial experience.” (Sarah Henriod, teacher researcher)

Introduction

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 attempt to describe the concept of empowerment as a spirit that permeates the centre.

The empowered community

Throughout this research report, teachers have been seen to nurture an empowering environment for members of their community. The stories of teaching and learning offer insight into our

understanding of the empowered child. For example, in chapter 2 Michael is empowered to take increasing responsibility for his learning as his ideas and contributions to the Sea and Wheels projects are encouraged. His confidence to participate strengthens and he gains an enhanced sense of self worth. Similar patterns can be seen in the stories of Blake (Red holden and Aeroplane stories) and Casey (Separation story) in chapter 3. These stories illustrate how the child's special interests and strengths are nurtured; the children gain confidence, enjoyment and a sense of identity within their relationships. Blake's story in particular describes him as a self-motivated learner who develops a positive view of his creativity as he learns different strategies to pursue his learning goals. This view of empowerment aligns with the intent of Te Whāriki. However, our perspective of empowerment moves us beyond recognizing outcomes for the individual child. The stories present a view of children, parents and teachers engaged in projects as empowered teachers and learners.

The active participation of the parents and whanau in projects contributed significantly to empowering the children in the stories shared in this report. In order to participate in such a manner, parents and whanau too have been empowered. Arthur et al. (1996) describe empowerment as *“taking a proactive stance that recognizes the competence people already have, or their potential competence”* (p. 13). The proactive stance taken by the teachers at New Beginnings Preschool reflects their belief that transforming relationships within the community are a catalyst for increased participation in children's learning. The relationships they strive to nurture are founded on a belief in the competence and confidence of all individuals as teachers and learners, and that collective participation contributes to the learning of all members of the community. The parents represented in the stories of Michael, Blake, Casey and Julie provide evidence of how, through open communication and collaboration with the centre staff, children and parents take on roles and responsibilities in teaching and learning practices. Through the collection of stories we gain insight into how parents themselves develop confidence and a sense of self-worth as educators in our community, how they take on increasing responsibility for their own participation as well as that of others, how they contribute their own special strengths and interests and join in learning in useful and appropriate ways.

Through the empowerment of parents and whanau, children's learning is supported and nurtured beyond the walls of the centre. If we view an empowering curriculum solely as applicable to children, we limit their learning opportunities. Continuity in children's learning across settings is a valuable outcome of an empowered community.

This research project found that through acknowledging and valuing individuals, interdependence within the community strengthens. Individuals are valued for who they are and are empowered to contribute and participate through their own choice. Through participation, trusting and respectful relationships among participants are strengthened. Centre communication practices engage participants in ongoing dialogue that support relationships to further develop, based on shared responsibility and interdependence. Rogoff (2003) presents a view of interdependence in community; *“People can both co-ordinate with others and act autonomously”* (p. 202). This view of interdependence accords with our view of how empowerment, as the spirit of the community, leads to people engaging together in shared responsibilities while also having freedom to act and grow individually.

The role of the teacher

The significance of how teachers act, think and relate to others for achieving our vision has emerged in each chapter of this report. In chapter 2 the notion of individual identity is positioned as recognition of people as competent and confident teachers and learners. Chapter 3 identifies building respectful and trusting relationships within the community as needing actions with that intent on the part of the teacher. Relationships are viewed as a form of social glue that allows identity of individuals to interact with community identity. In chapter 4 community identity is described as forming as people interact and utilize community resources in everyday activity. These three chapters encapsulate the beliefs, values and practices that emerged and became strengthened among teachers through the three-year research journey.

As a learning community, New Beginnings Preschool embodies the aspirations and actions of the teachers. It is therefore reasonable to look to the teachers to understand how and why the spirit of empowerment exists as it does in this community. Our understanding of empowerment is that it is about giving over exclusive power and shifting to collaboration and negotiation. The traditional role of ‘teachers as experts’ is given over to one of ‘teachers as co-learners’, as expertise within the community is recognized, valued and utilized. Leadership in the community is not static or assigned to one individual or group of people but can emerge in response to differing situations. Teachers empower the community by providing space for others to adopt different roles and responsibilities, including leadership.

Discussion amongst the teacher researcher team about empowerment as a defining concept of the community proved initially to be problematic. When asked what makes this early childhood environment an empowering place to be teachers commented that “it is just the way we are’. The

team needed to reflect back on its research journey to identify how empowerment is realized in this community. The following comment offers insight into how the spirit of empowerment of the community is embedded in the minds of teachers. Teachers were discussing their motivation for and approach to addressing challenges in the centre programme:

“Maybe we’re just looking for the way that’s going to work for all of us so that we can all work together.... ongoing together, looking for a good positive outcome for us, the children, the families, we’re looking for it to work all the way through. We had community on our mind as well ourselves.” (Team discussion, 28.2.06)

Decisions made by the teaching team focus on all members of the community rather than one group of participants or the other.

Findings 5.1: Empowerment in the things we do

The teaching team organizes ‘ways of doing’ in the centre programme: this enables participants to develop patterns of participation attuned to those ‘ways’. Identity of others is directly shaped by the practices in which they learn. When practices are empowering, participants learn to be empowering. The research team drew on examples of some of the decisions they had made during the research project to illustrate this understanding:

- Provision of real and authentic art media and resources: children learn that they are trusted and respected as capable and competent learners and in turn display respect for the resources and environment.
- Removal of timetabled whole group times such as kai time and group times – the power of choice to participate is given over to the child. Children learn to participate as self-motivated learners and share their knowledge with others.
- Providing easy access to children’s profile books and encouraging families to take these home: ownership of the books moved from centre to family. Families began contributing and sharing information.
- Addition of personally relevant comments and questions to parents in centre documentation: parents learn that their views are valued and make a difference for their child. Parents responded and participation in children’s learning increased.
- Adoption of a friendly, chatty style of documentation for teaching and learning stories: power of knowledge moved from teacher to a shared power. Communications represented two-way communication rather than a one-way process. Parental participation in their child’s learning and in centre practice increased.
- Developing consistent and familiar routines for group meetings with children: children learn to predict and plan for their participation. They take responsibility for organizing and maintaining group participation norms as well as taking the lead in discussions and direction of their investigations.
- Provision of space for and commitment to continuing children’s explorations over as long as the child requires: children learn that their ideas are valued and

Findings : Empowerment in the things we do

that learning can take you to unknown places over time. One child's enthusiasm for learning can be motivational and empowering for others as they become drawn into episodes of co-learning.

Findings 5.2: Empowerment in the things we say

Empowerment is evident in the spoken words used by teachers. Participants become attuned to the way of being in the centre through interactional conversations. Spoken words are powerful indicators of how one is viewed by others. The teaching team acknowledged that through the research process they have co-constructed new terminology as signifiers of shared meanings and understandings. These terms can be viewed as expressions of empowering beliefs and understandings.

- Group meetings and group experiences : underpinning meanings were based on providing children choice of participation.
- BINGO: the term was introduced in recognition of participants engaged in shared meaning making. The term defined empowering relationships among teacher, parent and child.
- Descriptors of visual art teachers and learners: dreamer & player; contributor, participator, & facilitator; achiever; explorer; and communicator. These terms all encapsulate the image of a co-learner. The underpinning understanding is that people need to be empowered in their dual identities of learner and teacher in order to participate effectively as co-learners.
- Infant and toddlers rather than under two's: the term under two conjures up an impression that these children are 'not yet there'. They are yet to become over two's; it creates a focus on the deficit. The use of infant toddler is an empowering term that acknowledges these children as competent capable learners in their own right.
- Project inquiry: acknowledges that learning is about active inquiry. The child's inquiry is central to the learning process and cannot be 'highjacked' by another persons interpretation of what they might be interested in. The child is empowered as a learner to pursue his/her inquiry.

Findings : Empowerment in the things we say

Findings 5.3: Empowerment in who we are

Teachers identify the key conviction that underpins empowerment in the centre as a belief in the competence and confidence of children and adults as both teachers and learners. This belief not only shapes how things are done and what is said but is also entrenched in the personae of teachers and is shown through teachers' interactions and self-identity. This teacher researcher team identifies the following characteristics of an empowering teacher:

- Willing to take risks and accept challenge
- Passionate and enthusiastic about teaching and learning
- Open to other people's ideas
- View of self as both learner and teacher
- Team player who willingly supports and nurtures others

Findings : Empowerment in who we are

- Willing to lead and to be led
- Accepting of change as part of every day life
- Ability to ‘hear’ people, not just listen to their words
- Respectful of every parent as an individual in their own right, not just as a child’s parent
- Practises critical reflection, of self and collectively with the teaching team
- Effective communicator, able to engage with everyone without the ‘baggage’ of assumptions
- Committed to the aspirations of the teaching team and community
- Committed to guiding not controlling
- Can take responsibility for self as well as others

Findings : Empowerment in who we are

Teachers hold a view of themselves as capable and confident members of the community. They put ‘willing to take risks and accept challenge’ at the head of their list as it seems the most salient characteristic. One teacher put this understanding into words as she explained it as being a part of who each individual teacher is: *“In life, if you try something and make a mistake it’s OK. You can undo that and try again. You just reflect on it and try again.”* (Team discussion, 28.2.06)

This research project has involved this teaching team in investigating their own practices and understandings. Their journey of inquiry has involved seeking understandings about and solutions to dilemmas, as well as developing knowledge of effective approaches to enhancing learning for the children in their community. Their inquiries did not take them to seek out another person’s answer, or to adopt a ‘proven’ recipe for success. They demonstrated a commitment to the community by taking on the challenge of the research project and taking risks in learning so that the outcome would better serve their learning community; the New Beginnings Preschool.

In developing this list of teacher characteristics the teacher researcher team reinforced the notion of respecting parents as crucial members of their community:

“We have to have the belief that parents are a crucial part of the community – without it there wouldn’t be such a great need or desire to really make connections and relationships other than just ‘hi, did you have a good day?’ You have to make the effort.” (Team Discussion, 14.3.06)

The belief that children are capable learners and teachers was reinforced by the following: *“they (children) can take things to heights we don’t know they are capable of.”* (from teacher discussion, Feb. 2006).

Empowerment of teachers

We need to identify practices that teachers welcome and perform confidently in order to understand what enables teachers to be empowering in their role. We explore two main practices to discuss empowerment of teachers: centre leadership and management practices, and the practice of action research.

Empowered by centre leadership and management practices

The Management Board of the centre consists of a group of parents who voluntarily take on centre governance responsibilities. This group played an integral role in the centre from the initial stage of submitting an expression of interest in the Centres of Innovation (COI) programme. The decision to approach the COI challenge was not taken lightly. The management board believed in the competence of the teachers, the competence of the children, and the competence of themselves as representatives of the centre's parents. The ways in which roles and responsibilities of the management board are distributed is reflective of this belief. Each person initially takes on a particular responsibility. These responsibilities can be given over to another at any time as the incumbent shares their knowledge and initiates the new person into the role. Overall centre management responsibility is shared between the licensee (board chair) and the head teacher. This structure results in a distribution of power where no one person holds exclusive control. The voices of teachers and parents are represented in management decisions.

The management board empowered the teaching/research team by supporting practices such as:

- Regular weekly non-contact time for individual teachers as well as for the teaching team to meet and engage in professional dialogue
- Staffing above regulatory adult: child ratios
- Establishing curriculum budgets so teachers have autonomy in decision-making.

The head teacher holds a critical role as pivot between the management and teaching groups. She holds dual roles of teaching and management responsibilities. Her leadership cannot be overlooked as we consider empowerment in this community. As explained earlier in this report the innovative ideas for teaching and learning using a project approach and visual art originated with the head teacher. The empowering structures and practices of the centre had been established under the influence of the head teacher's beliefs and vision. The development of the innovative practices in the centre, as told in this report, are illustrative of how an empowered community can progress and take ownership of new inspirational ideas. Leadership was not about a hierarchical head showing

the way but about provoking thinking and empowering others to learn and grow, while at the same time engaging in learning with the community.

Empowerment through research involvement

As each chapter has discussed in the final reflective comments, teachers' participation as practitioner researchers in this research project has proven to be an empowering experience.

Finding 5.4: Empowerment through research involvement

Participation in this research project enabled teachers to:

- focus on their practice,
- draw on theoretical tools and understandings to strengthen their investigations into practice,
- gain insights from literature to assist in understanding practice, and
- participate in processes that enable individual and collective knowledge to develop.

Findings : Empowerment
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involvement

The result of this empowerment has been implementation of practices that are personally and theoretically sound. Teachers in this environment have not developed as clones of each other but have gained strength in their individuality as well as their collective practice. They have been empowered in their own learning and development as early childhood professionals.

The infant toddler teachers' experience

Teacher learning about the participatory action research process has had an impact on pedagogical practices in the centre. When the research began, teachers identified a similarity between the action research process and their regular curriculum management process. They adopted familiar terms to describe the cyclical steps of action research (see chapter 1 – Research approaches - for a detailed explanation). Over time teachers gained knowledge of action research through their experience, and began to use action research language to define their assessment, planning and evaluation practices. This approach began in the infant and toddler area. Over the period of a year, two teachers adopted the framework of reflection, design, fieldwork, analysis and conclusion, and plan/reflect (Wadsworth, 1991) as a guide for emergent curriculum planning in the infant and toddler programme. This occurred at a time when both teachers were new to this area of teaching and were exploring together how they could support project work for infant and toddlers. Their experience is told in the following infant and toddler story of empowerment.

Empowerment in action within the infant and toddler environment

Authors: Debbie and Dawn

The following story describes an approach to working with infants and toddlers based on the philosophy of empowerment: empowerment of the child, empowerment of the parent, empowerment of the teacher. As has been said in the introduction to this chapter, it is the practices of the teachers that differentiate an early childhood learning community from a regular early childhood place of learning.

Introduction

The beginning of 2005 saw two new infant and toddler teachers begin working in this area of the centre. We had both spent the majority of our time in ECE working with over two year old children, therefore to come into an infant and toddler environment brought with it a variety of questions. What do relationships look like for this age group? What does group learning look like for this age group? What is our image of the infant and toddler? We chose to refer to the environment as ‘infant and toddler’ due to the connotations that go with the term ‘under-two’. This commonly used ECE term appears to describe the two year old age as some sort of ‘benchmark’ age, which then could mean that those children who are younger than that age are somehow ‘lesser than’. It would probably be fair to say that we both had similar assumptions regarding this age group when we first started – however the year was going to allow us to discover something completely different!

We began the year in the only way we knew how – look for an interest that was emerging from one or a few children and start from there. At the time there were two children in particular who seemed to need the outside environment as part of the daily settling process. This raised the question - ‘why are children so interested in the outside environment’. This interest as a project inquiry was initially documented in the regular learning story format with the addition of our weekly emergent planning reflections. We used the ‘noticing, recognizing, responding’ framework.

Influence of theory

Very quickly it seemed that this ‘project’ was going to look different from those done with the 2-5 year aged children. Individual learning appeared stronger in this area. The following important themes emerged for us during this first project inquiry:

- A sound understanding of the *intra-personal* (Rogoff, 2003) view of the ‘social individual’ developed. Documentation allowed us to create an on-going in-depth view of the child, while at the same time focusing on the important people, places and things that surrounded the child.
- Communication practices that strengthen parental engagement were analyzed as we formulated a *five-level framework of communication and documentation* that supports relationship development between parent and teacher. This framework can be found in chapter 3 of this report in “Casey’s story”.

Theory as a foundation for practice

For about a month we slowly introduced more and more natural materials into the environment after one of us had read an article *Experimenting with the world: John Dewey and the early childhood classroom* (Cuffaro, 1995), viewing the *social individual* from a Deweyan perspective. This article gave guidance to the social individual, group experiences, and connections with home and community. Where Cuffaro (ibid) talked about using materials and experiences as ‘play partners’, we chose to interpret this as being ‘natural’ materials for the purposes of assisting our own thinking. As a result, the second project inquiry for the year presented itself – “*The use of natural materials as a way of extending active participation within the inside environment*”.

Strengthening teacher understanding of participatory action research

Early April saw one of us having to give a talk at the Christchurch College of Education on action research. We had both just presented at the recent “Too Infantastic” Conference. These two events served to provoke us to explore action research as a form of emergent curriculum planning for their project work. We began to incorporate the participatory action research process of: reflection, design, fieldwork, analysis and conclusion, and planning (Wadsworth, 1991) into project work planning. Using this action research methodology for emergent planning enabled us to become far more aware of the ‘journey’ of the inquiry as it moved through the stages. We felt that we were ‘paving the way’ for a new approach to working with infants and toddlers:

- In the use of participatory action research processes for curriculum planning.
- In the introduction of a new curriculum approach for infants and toddlers based on natural materials. We had an ‘innate understanding’ of how natural materials stimulate and inspire very young children’s imagination and creativity.

We became aware that an ‘overall project’ had now embedded itself: not just in our practice, but in the practice of the infant and toddler community as a whole i.e.; ‘*the use of natural materials*’. Read on and we’ll tell you how. Moreover this current exploration was now being interpreted as more of a ‘research cycle of inquiry’, rather than another ‘project’.

Engaging parental interest

Parents had come on-board with the idea of the use of natural materials with their children. Natural materials were being displayed visually in the morning alongside other ‘found’ objects – children were naturally curious as to the ‘open-ended’ nature of the materials. Musical instruments ‘displayed’ alongside dolls, shells and stones of many various colours complemented the equipment on offer to the children. Play dough was replaced by clay, and plastic cutters were replaced by shells. Children’s and parents’ curiosity was continually being stimulated. The environment was changing as ‘nature’ was on display inside creating an aesthetically pleasing and calming atmosphere. Teachers, parents and children were all talking about the beauty of nature.

Rethinking ‘visual art’ for infants and toddlers

The philosophy of this particular infant and toddler environment is that all materials should be accessible for the children so that they can access them when they want to. Therefore, the door to the cupboard where art materials are kept is always open with the materials kept at a low shelf level for easy accessibility for the young children. Children

experienced paint, clay, pens, collage etc. as a normal part of their everyday programme. There was another layer of ‘visual’ art that became apparent within this environment and that was the display philosophy. Displays included teacher’s own art-work and children’s work alongside natural materials both inside and outside. The term ‘visual’ extended past its traditional sense. Visual art was in the environment! The environment was visual art!

Members of the infant and toddler community became empowered as artists in their own right. They took their visual art display ability into their own private homes etc. Visual art had certainly embedded itself into the infant and toddler community as a whole. Visual art helped create relationships that were unique due to the participant’s enjoyment of the visual display of natural materials.

Planning for the new outside area

By this time it was clear to parents and teachers that something needed to be done about the outside environment to improve its aesthetics and value what it could contribute to the infants and toddlers curriculum and inquiries. So a meeting was planned to explore what we (the infant and toddler community) wanted the outside environment to look like. Interested parents and teachers attended. Parents suggested a working bee so a date was set. On the day those parents and teachers that could come gave up seven hours of their Sunday to develop a beautiful natural environment. Teachers and parents shared responsibility for the final ‘look’ of the outside area. All agreed it was well worth the effort of everyone involved.

Teacher reflection

In the ‘analysis and conclusion’ stage of the participatory action research cycle we reflected on the way parents had become empowered to make decisions for their children’s outdoor environment. We had both made it clear that this was the parents’ responsibility, as well as the teachers. This decision-making process was very evident during the time when one teacher went off to buy more native plants with a parent and on return found a whole area that had been designed, planned and created by the parents. We documented our reflections about this experience during our weekly planning non-contact time. We were interested in evaluating how our practices had attracted parental participation in the project inquiry. Our documentation shows that our attention moved from parental involvement to questions about and recognition of children’s learning:

Taken from teachers’ planning journal, October 2005.

Due to the on-going nature of this inquiry, we wanted to entice further participation from parents. We felt that a good way to do this was to present all information regarding the project in photo and narrative format within the infant and toddler area. We saw that there were differing reasons for this visual documentation as the journey of the inquiry preceded; they were:

- *Invite participation through information giving, i.e.: newsletter put up on door (not, however given out personally to each parent),*
- *Entice participation through information giving, i.e.: reporting back what had been brought through teacher reflections,*
- *Inspire the contribution of ideas through photographic media, i.e.: examples of outside environments found in magazines, and*
- *Celebrate participation through sharing narratives and photos of the working-bee; this served to strengthen the relationships of those people who participated, while also informing the community as a whole.*

Identifying increased parent participation, community spirit, engagement

The parents who have participated to a more in-depth level within the project have also been involved in a process where their relationships have been strengthened between teachers. Community spirit has developed throughout the project as we have noticed people who are not directly involved with our infant and toddlers area, wanting to become involved, This includes some over-two teachers, partners of teachers, and the teacher who works with the infant and toddlers part time and her family. Even an over-two parent (who was on the committee) felt a desire to participate. The philosophy behind the new environment has become a talking point with new and existing parents. It allows you a common ground to talk with to parents, ie: we all have connections with the natural environment (if we think back to when we were children).

We reflected on an environment that we called – ‘inside outside / outside in’:

The previous inquiry looked at the use of natural materials as a form of ‘play and display’ for the inside. This current inquiry saw us, initially, exploring what a ‘play and display’ with natural materials concept would look like for the outside. Our data (in the form of photos) supports increased gross motor experiences in action. We have had to remind ourselves to record this use of the environment as the children are naturally setting their own new challenges on such a regular basis that it seems commonplace. We have noticed that while this current inquiry was based on looking at the outside, the inside use of natural materials has strengthened even more. This tells us that what was originally a project inquiry has now become our curriculum, flowing between the inside and the outside.

Identifying children’s strengthened engagement

It became apparent throughout the introduction of natural materials into the children’s environment that provision was made for more exploratory play spaces. The transformation of the outside play space has allowed for:

- *Individual children’s needs and challenges to be met,*
- *The provision of materials that have more than one purpose, which meet the needs of different abilities,*
- *Children to sit and wonder, and take time out,*
- *Children to be stimulated to try out theories, to set their challenges and feel powerful,*
- *Continuity of children’s experiences/learning between home and centre,*
- *An affinity or deeper connection with the natural world around them that provides for a strengthened sense of well-being,*
- *The provision of materials that adults can relate to and play with as well, grounded in the familiar, making past connections,*
- *Parents and teachers to contribute to the environment as well as children as they come to it from a shared perspective, and*
- *An environment that commands respect.*

Redefining project work - for the infants and toddlers

As we progressed through the projects of 2005, we began to interpret a different type of project, in fact we became increasingly uncomfortable with the term project-based learning and become more comfortable with the terminology of inquiry-based learning. The word project didn't seem to sit comfortably with the inquiry developments that occurred. The term 'inquiry' is one that we interpret as allowing for all inquiries within the community. The 'nature' of the inquiry will look different for different participants.

Documentation plays a huge part within the process of an inquiry. As the documentation develops and strengthens so do the parent/teacher/child relationships. The 'open nature' of an inquiry means that everyone's participation is acknowledged as being valuable. Everyone's participation is documented - the child, the parent/whanau, other children involved in the child's learning, and the centre as a whole. Inquiry based learning invites participation, which in turn builds empowerment. Children's natural curiosities are responded to as adults ask more and 'tell' less. We came to the infant and toddler environment with a belief in the 'competent child'. After a year of working together we have also gained a picture of the 'competent parent', and view our practice as being 'competent teachers'. Competence creates a sense of empowerment. As children, parents and teachers become empowered within this community of learners, a community of inquiry develops; one that is built on a philosophy of participation.

Reshaping 'emergent planning' through the use of Participatory Action Research

As we incorporated the principles of participatory action research into our reflection and planning process, we began to view a new area of interest as a 'spin-off' cycle from the previous inquiry rather than a completely different project. The following framework guides our emergent planning process:

1. *Reflection* starts the process off as teachers allow time for a new interest to emerge, children's individual or group learning is documented using the learning story process during this time. Teachers continue to meet weekly to reflect together.
2. *Design* – this stage may occur over one or two meetings – teachers have taken the time to reflect on the interest and are now at a point where they interpret the area of inquiry, and design where to from here.
3. *Fieldwork* – this stage is the central part of the inquiry and occurs over many weeks. As the inquiry interest is identified it allows children, parents and teachers to work together in a atmosphere of participation. On-going documentation records everyone's participation within the inquiry. Continuity is strengthened within the environment.
4. *Analysis and Conclusion* – this stage sees the inquiry interest coming to an end. Once again the teachers spend at least a couple of weeks discussing the progress of the inquiry and what they have discovered through out the process.
5. *Plan* – A new area of inquiry is developing as a 'spin-off' from the previous inquiry. This area is identified, and the teachers' then move through the process again as a new cycle begins!

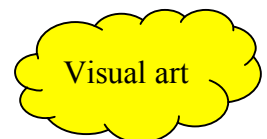
Embedding participatory action research as regular practice

Over the year the infant and toddler teachers shared their work with the whole team at weekly meetings. Over-two teachers have now begun adopting action research processes into their own work. This has occurred alongside recognition of the emerging insight described at the end of chapter 4; the shift from project work to project inquiries. It would appear that there have been two influences to this shift. One was when teachers were introduced to new thinking about children's theories and queries, and the other has been the experience gained through using participatory action research as a process for teacher learning. Action research begins with an inquiry, it is about participants using their own practices and the tools available to them to explore and uncover new learning as they pursue their query. The framework of participatory action research sits comfortably with the ways teachers aspire to work with children's inquiries. This will be a continued area of inquiry for the teaching team. Teachers acknowledge that their experience in action research over the past three years will have a lasting impact. Perhaps it is as we earlier described: participants in a community develop patterns of participation aligned to the practices in which they learn. These teachers have attuned themselves to participatory action research practices that have proven to be of value in different ways, individually as well as collectively.

A way of being - Concluding reflections

Community learning

The spirit of empowerment permeates the people, place and things at New Beginnings Preschool. Empowerment, as the spirit of the community, fosters interdependent relationships between children, teachers and parents/whanau. Empowering relationships are viewed as a form of social glue that allows identity of individuals to interact with community identity so that each is, in some complex iterative way, constantly feeding into and creating the other.



Visual Art

Empowerment of teachers played a strong part in their investigations into visual art in the centre. As described in chapter two, the initial investigation originated through a growing awareness of differing perspectives and a need for this team to firmly position their own beliefs and practices.

The research journey enabled teachers to come to understand themselves in relation to visual art in their own lives. Participation in art workshops offered teachers something that they otherwise did not have the opportunity for within this busy early childhood centre. They talked about how they were able to socialize and ‘experience being themselves’ as opposed to meeting for regular centre administrative requirements. This proved to be important in strengthening respectful and trusting relationships within the teaching team. As individuals shared personal information about their feelings and experiences, team relationships strengthened, as did the way they worked together in the programme. Acceptance of diverse perspectives within the teaching team reached out into the community. Teachers spoke of being more open and in tune with others, having more tolerance and understanding. Teachers came to understand visual art as a very personal expression. The expression frequently used to describe this was that ‘art is like a window to the soul.’

As individual teachers felt empowered through their own special strengths and abilities, they were motivated to learn more. Teacher stories contained in this report are a testimony to this learning. A key outcome in this area of investigation has been the emergence of teachers’ conscious knowledge and understandings of this community’s visual art values and beliefs, or in other words an understanding of the paradigm that has become embedded through practice in the community. The principles that underpin the approach taken to visual art teaching and learning in the centre can be summed up as:

- All participants are empowered as teachers and learners. We learn from and respect each other’s approach to art.
- Individuality in art learning and creation contributes to community learning.
- Art and creativity lives within – expression is a personal pursuit.
- Through art one expresses feelings, emotions, ideas, imagination, thinking and wonderings.
- Art is a tool for communicating and creating, as well as a product for appreciating.
- Art learning involves a body of knowledge, ‘know how’ and self-efficacy.

Project work

Project work practices in the centre programme evolved over the three years of this research project as the teaching team engaged in discussions and explorations to review and develop practice. The opportunities for discussion proved to be instrumental to strengthening the collective vision of the teaching team. Discussions provided the thinking time, when teachers reflected on what was



happening for children and families in relation to their vision for project work in the curriculum. Teachers were empowered through the research process to find their own way as they deconstructed and reconstructed practices and understandings. They commented on how important it was not to be guided by a sense of needing to ‘do it the right way’. There was no need to adhere to a recipe for implementing project work in the centre.

Changes in project work practices occurred as the teaching team experienced change in team membership. Throughout periods of staff change the teaching team never lost sight of the key principle underpinning the project approach to curriculum; the socio-constructivist theoretical view of learning and development. The understanding of children, parents and teachers working collaboratively to develop shared understandings and acquire new knowledge through explorations and investigations of things that are relevant and meaningful to all parties was passed on to new members of the teaching team. In the early phase, existing staff continued project practices and new staff joined in.

At a time when a number of staff changes occurred within a short time-frame, alongside changes in existing teacher responsibilities, change impacted more dramatically on the community. Existing practices were questioned and the decision was made to remove one of the supporting project work structures; group time. Unknowingly, the team removed one of the cultural practices of the learning community and, as a result, community participation suffered. Group times had provided a familiar routine and time for shared communication among community members. The community became disempowered as this avenue for participation disappeared. During this time the vision of community engaging together in children’s learning was retained by both teachers and parents. This provided the teaching team with the impetus to continue to work toward re-igniting the magic the community once had. The memory of what the community had once enjoyed was present in the centre; families had experienced it, documentation provided evidence of it, longer-term teachers talked about it, and children’s learning stories showed that they were continuing to use similar processes for their learning. The vision was owned by the community, teachers had responsibility for reconstructing practices that would enable the vision to re-ignite. Participation in this research project provided extra motivation for continuing to reconstruct projects in the programme.

Projects became re-established in the centre and once again there was excitement in the community as parents, children and teachers engaged together in learning. Teachers found they needed to focus on what was happening for their community rather than what was, or was not, happening for the teaching team in order to find a direction to build their project practices once again. The teaching team is but one group of people who make up the community. In a learning community, allowing

the needs of one group to overshadow that of other participants can be detrimental to the community or in other words, disempowering.

Some practices that now support projects differ in ways from previous practices. Changes include:

- Documenting children's learning to invite two-way communication with parents
- Documenting children's learning as a sequence of connected stories through which individual children's learning and progress is visible
- Re-introducing group meetings at a different time of the day with the understanding that children joined in of their own choice i.e. when it held relevance and meaning for them
- A mixed age range of children (2-5 year olds) can work together on project inquiries in the over two area
- Forming projects around an inquiry rather than a topic

Many of the original practices that supported project implementation remain, such as:

- Teachers working together during group meetings with children to facilitate and document the discussions
- Collating documentation about children's involvement in children's profile books that parents and children can access and take home
- Teachers meeting during non-contact time to analyse and discuss children's learning, and to prepare for how they intend to respond
- Providing varied opportunities throughout a project to encourage and support parents/whanau as interested and willing participants
- Documenting projects as journeys of learning that are collated into books or wall displays

Researcher learning

Research processes

The final stages of this research project involved the teacher researcher team in preparing, drafting, revising and writing the final research report. As a collaborative exercise the team participated in reflective discussions that looked back on the full picture of the three-year research journey. Findings were affirmed and consolidated as members related their experiences to the written

document. The notion of empowerment was explored in depth during the process of reflection and writing.

Teacher reflection on involvement in participatory action research processes held strong resemblance to the vision of an empowering curriculum for children as expressed in Te Whāriki.

Teacher researchers concur with the belief that participatory action research has enabled them to:

- Take increasing responsibility for their own learning and care
- Develop an enhanced sense of identity, self-worth, 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.