

Why does the New Zealand Teachers Council care about leadership in early childhood education?

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Abstract

Many teachers think the Teachers Council (Council) is only about teacher registration and gaining a practising certificate every three years. For many teachers in early childhood education (ECE) the Council may not figure in their thinking at all. However, another of the Council's mandates is to provide professional leadership to teachers and our current work to further a national leadership development strategy for the ECE sector is evidence of this.

The Council's Early Childhood Education Advisory Group (ECEAG) identified a need for leadership development programmes. Although these were signalled in the strategic plan for ECE: Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki (Ministry of Education, 2002), by the end of 2007 there had been little indication that they were planned. The Council's first response was the publication of a discussion paper "Conceptualising leadership in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand" (Thornton, Wansbrough, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken, & Tamati, 2009) which describes the current situation, the challenges and possibilities. Recent work is around drafting a strategy to influence the establishment and availability of leadership programmes for all ECE teachers who may wish to further their skills and knowledge. The Council sees itself facilitating rather than directing this work for the sector.

Introduction

The New Zealand Teachers Council Te Pouherenga Kaiako o Aotearoa is charged with maintaining a register of teachers as one of its main functions. While kindergarten teachers have a longer history of being qualified and registered, many other ECE teachers will have embarked on the registration process more recently in order for their service to gain higher rates of Ministry of Education funding. As a result many ECE teachers view the Council as something they must comply with and do not appreciate the professional leadership role that the Council is also mandated to provide. This paper will provide an insight to the Council's role as the professional body for teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand and also how the Council has listened to the sector and supported its call for a leadership development strategy.

Background

The Council came into being with the Education Standards Act of 2001, although the earlier Education Act 1989 had made registration mandatory for primary, secondary and kindergarten teachers. It is this Act that guides who, how and when teachers gain and maintain their teacher registration.

The Council is made up of two parts. The first part is the statutory group of people who are the elected and appointed representatives who govern what happens, make disciplinary decisions, decide which institutions can recommend teachers for registration and which initial teacher education programmes are suitable for teacher registration. The part that most teachers come in contact with are the 40 people who staff the office and process the registration applications, research and background disciplinary cases, and provide policy and strategic advice. The latter carry out the work required for the Council to effect its functions. These functions include providing professional leadership and encouraging best teaching practice.

In addition to the Council members who sit for two days every month to consider and sponsor a work programme, there are two advisory groups. These are the Māori Medium Advisory group and the Early Childhood Education Advisory Group (ECEAG). Both of these groups provide an insight into parts of the education sector that do not have a strong history of qualifications and registration. They are developing sectors noted for diversity and 'strain' in

regards to accessing qualified teachers. As a result the Council pays attention to the advisory groups as barometers of specific issues in these sectors.

Focus on ECE Leadership

At the September 2007 ECEAG, members advocated for the Council to provide some stimulus and [decision-making on leadership](#) development for ECE services. They were concerned that although there was an action step in the ECE strategic plan, Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki (Ministry of Education, 2002) identifying leadership development programmes for the sector, there had been little indication these were being considered. The advisory group felt this 'promise' needed to be adhered to and not lost sight of. The recommendation they made to Council was accepted and a Think Tank was convened to determine what was necessary to ensure ECE teachers would have access to development programmes along the lines of what was available to school leaders.

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The Think Tank was convened in February 2008 and members recommended a position paper to outline the current situation with regard to leadership development in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Council published this as an occasional paper in 2009 (Thornton, Wansbrough, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken and Tamati, 2009) and its main theses will be outlined below.

In championing this work on behalf of the ECE sector, the Council is demonstrating the degree to which it values the input of its ECE advisory members and the degree to which it cares about improving the quality of teaching and learning in ECE. Professional leaders, be they positional leaders or those taking responsibility for leading, are crucial to the work of the Teachers Council. Effective leadership underpins any initiatives to strengthen the capability of teachers.

Strategic positioning of ECE leadership and Council projects

The Council has a number of professional projects that rely on the professional leader. Notably the teacher registration process is a high trust model which requires professional leaders to exercise an informed professional judgement. They are the ultimate signature in recommending to the Council a teacher for full registration. The induction and mentoring requirement necessitates a professional leader to arrange, support, resource and monitor a programme of advice and guidance suitable for the beginning teacher in their service.

In 2010 and 2011 the Council will be trusting professional leaders to become familiar with the new Registered Teacher Criteria, to review their appraisal documentation to encompass these and to share knowledge and understanding with their teaching team. They may also be the mentor teacher developing an induction programme for beginning teachers but they may share this role with the mentor teachers in their service to ensure the change from the Satisfactory Teacher Dimensions to the Registered Teacher Criteria is smooth and well informed.

The professional leader is also the "head learner" (Edwards, 2003) in their service. They will model engagement with current research on teaching and learning, and will be involved in the professional development with which their teaching team engages. This support for professional development is important for their own ongoing professional learning and registration but also for driving change and improvement in their service.

So leadership practices in ECE services are of strategic interest to the Council and it has shown that it is heading the sector by agreeing to facilitate work on a strategy framework for leadership development.

Leadership issues

The occasional paper *Conceptualising leadership in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand* identified some issues which have limited a concerted approach to developing leaders for ECE. One of the factors has been the lack of identification with being a leader, with many in positional leadership roles wanting to minimise the hierarchy status associated with leadership positions (Hard, 2004). As they often work alongside other teachers during the

day and share curriculum responsibilities leaders usually still want to be considered one of the team. Coupled with this is a lack of awareness of what constitutes leadership practices, with many confusing their role with management responsibilities (the getting things done) (Bloom, 2003).

The fact that ECE teachers are predominantly women and more comfortable with collaborative approaches and consensus decision-making, many in leadership positions have not realised the need to develop their knowledge and skills specifically around their leadership practices.

Literature focused on ECE leadership has also been scant and much of the writing has drawn on business and school literature in this area. ECE has a strong emphasis on socio-cultural theory and the contextualisation of practice. This will mean that leadership will look different in the diverse contexts which are influenced by ethnicity, cultural, philosophical and class beliefs that make up the community context (Fitzgerald, 2003).

The occasional paper also highlighted findings from the available literature about leadership development programmes and what is necessary in order to maximise the impact on leaders. One-off courses with learning about specific skills were seen to be insufficient. Instead, to be effective teachers required programmes that were based on the assessed needs of the individual leaders, that involved follow-up and were undertaken over a sustained period of time. Additionally, there needed to be opportunities for reflection on real-life experiences and actual scenarios to make the learning relevant and actionable (West-Burnham, 2003).

Progressing the leadership focus

The paper was intended to be a starting point. Taking the project further the Council hosted an ECE Leadership Workshop Day in November 2009, attended by over 70 representatives from ECE groups, professional development providers, two groups of Centres of Innovation participants, ECEAG members and Council representatives. After a morning of thought provoking presentations work began on drafting statements about leadership in ECE.

The interesting commonalities from this session were around how the principles of Te Whāriki might provide a suitable framework, along with an aspiration statement similar to that for children, that teachers will be competent and confident leaders. The Council at this meeting volunteered to convene a writing group to take this early conceptualisation further so that something could be prepared for sector feedback.

Council also agreed to host a writing group and members of the workshop day were invited to be involved. The Council sought to have a small group that ensured academic, practitioner, Māori and Pasifika perspectives. The eight who met worked on a draft vision statement as well as characteristics of leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The draft vision collated from this work was presented to the attendees at the ECC conference:

Leadership in ECE in Aotearoa creates dynamic and vibrant learning communities where children and adults are strong in their identity and are confident, connected and responsible citizens of the world.

A list of characteristics was shared at the conference with participants being asked to agree, suggest other phrasing or disagree. The characteristics which gained a positive endorsement were:

- courageous ethical practice
- building strong respectful and trusting relationships
- robust conversations and collaboration
- focused on learning and learners
- fostering of a culture of critical reflection
- future focused and open to change
- having a belief in self and others
- openness to change and innovation

- responsibility for own and other's learning
- purposeful action toward a vision.

A characteristic added to the list was having a focus on children's rights and being an advocate.

Conclusion

This work still has a way to go before being shared around the major ECE organisations and stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education. By that time it is expected it will be a fuller framework that will be useful in guiding professional development providers of leadership programmes. It is also expected to signal the breadth and depth of understanding about what development leaders have a right to receive to ensure they do the best they can for children and families. The Ministry of Education is about to announce the programmes of professional development for ECE that it will be funding for 2010-2012. The ECE sector is waiting in great anticipation to see what form these will take. Eventually ECE will not only have leadership professional development opportunities available, but also a leadership framework that establishes a vision as well as key principles. All this work is a direct result of the Teachers Council cared enough to listen to its advisory group when it voiced concerns on behalf of the ECE sector.

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