Professional Dialogue as Professional Learning

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: *This article discusses professional dialogue as an important aspect of professionalism for early childhood teachers. It draws on the experiences of four qualified early childhood teachers of one teaching team in an early childhood centre who engaged in extensive professional dialogue with each other. Dialogue focused on the values that underpinned and were reflected in their teaching practice. These values were discussed in order to explore the commonalities and differences in teaching philosophies amongst the team. The article outlines both the benefits and the challenges of engaging in professional dialogue by drawing on the perceptions of the teachers who participated. The article contends that professional dialogue should be viewed as an alternative form of professional learning.*

INTRODUCTION

In Aotearoa New Zealand the national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), constructs a common framework for the learning environment and curriculum of each early childhood centre. Since 2008, the new early childhood education regulations require the mandatory use of *Te Whāriki*, the national early childhood curriculum, as a basis for programme planning in each early childhood centre, while government policies require that at least 50% of teachers in a centre are qualified. However, these regulatory requirements do not ensure that a shared understanding of *Te Whāriki* exists amongst staff in a centre. The non-prescriptive nature of the curriculum document means that it can be interpreted in multiple ways that are specific to each context (Alvstad, Duncan & Berge, 2009; Nuttall, 2003). Within each context, however, teachers' own personal, social and cultural values and experiences may mean that interpretations of the documents and the values that underpin teaching can vary within a teaching team.

The article draws on the experiences of four qualified early childhood education teachers from one centre who met monthly for a year to engage in professional dialogue about the values that underpinned their personal philosophies of teaching, and to review and reflect on how their individual teaching practice reflected the values they had espoused. It is suggested that using professional dialogue to form a shared understanding of values and interpretations of documents creates a worthwhile form of professional learning.

PROFESSIONALISM AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

Professionalism is a socially constructed concept that can be viewed in many ways and within the early childhood sector there no prevailing definition of professionalism. One view of professionalism is that it entails the application of specialised knowledge and adherence to professional standards in order to achieve desired outcomes (Caulfield, 1997). Another view is that professionalism involves critical inquiry about teaching practice whilst remaining open and responsive to changing influences in their context (Dalli, 2010). The second approach ensures that new knowledge is continually being incorporated into each teacher's existing repertoire.

Professionalization is defined as the social and educational process used to transform those who earn their living by educating to justify specialist expertise and moral integrity appropriate to their chosen profession (Macpherson, 2010). In recent years, early childhood teaching and teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand have undergone a period of intense professionalization. This is the result of initiatives such as the policies outlined in the 10 year strategic plan (an increase of qualified staff, regular reviews of practice, and improved ICT skills among others), the introduction of a two-year advice and guidance programme for provisionally registered teachers, and the Graduating Teacher Standards and Registered Teacher Criteria instigated by the New Zealand Teachers Council. In addition, the use of *Te Whāriki* as the national early childhood curriculum has become mandatory. These initiatives can be considered as instrumental in creating and maintaining a foundation for professional practice in early childhood education that aims to create an acceptable standard of professionalism within the early childhood sector. This approach to professionalization arises from the first definition of professionalism.

Initiatives such as these can be critiqued from a philosophical stance as *normalising* and *disciplining* teachers to shape their professional practice to a predetermined outcome (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007) that reflects such notions as *best practice* and *evidence-based practice.* Simultaneously, however, official standards may form the useful function of enhancing early childhood teachers' professional credibility (Moss, 2010), which enables teachers to claim greater professional status that in turn leads to better pay and working conditions. Early childhood teachers, who were recently surveyed to define the characteristics of an early childhood education professional, cited such factors as being highly paid, being competent, and having respectability (Dalli, 2008), all of which can be viewed as outward signs of professionalism that establish professional credibility. This article recognizes the importance of professional standards in teaching practice, and, like the early childhood teachers surveyed in Dalli's study, welcomes the improved status, pay and working conditions that such professionalism commands, but suggests that there is another aspect of professionalism that is yet to be fully recognised. This aspect is professional dialogue.

Professional dialogue reflects the second view of professionalism that holds that critical inquiry about teaching practice is also an important aspect of professionalism. This view contends that professionalism, in addition to having a clear set of external standards to frame practice, also implies that teachers apply subjective values and beliefs to their teaching practice. From this viewpoint 'professionalism is not an end in itself – a state of being – but an on-going effort – a process of becoming' (Caulfield, 1997, p.263).

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE

Unlike the notions of *best practice* and *evidence-based practice* that suggest knowledge about teaching practice is objective and that there is one fixed certain way of teaching that can be outlined in a document to form the basis of external accountability (Urban, 2008), professional dialogue recognizes the subjective nature of teaching practice. *Te Whāriki* does not prescribe outcomes that can guide a teacher's practice, so each teacher within a teaching team, and each teaching team as a whole, must interpret the curriculum aims to make decisions to suit each specific early childhood teaching context. As teaching contexts are affected by the dynamics of relationships and contextual, social and political influences, they are in a constant state of change. This indicates that negotiations about decision-making processes need to be on-going.

The process of negotiation and decision-making has been termed *wise practice* (Goodfellow, 2003). Wise practice has been defined as deriving from practical wisdom, a combination of expert knowledge with sound judgement and thoughtful action. Such wisdom is developed from teachers being able to read a situation from the implicit messages gleaned from interactions within the context where one works, and to learn from these interactions. However, practical wisdom refers to that part of the early childhood education teacher's role that is usually invisible and submerged, unless deliberate attempts are made to reveal it.

It can be presumed that each decision made about teaching practice is not based solely on knowledge of the government documents but is also influenced by the children's interests and dispositions, as well as each teacher's personal philosophy of education and values about teaching and learning. These influences blend to form what is often termed the teacher's personal theories (Malaguzzi, 1998), the invisible but powerful personal beliefs that form a strong driving force behind practice. Although it is thought that each teacher possesses such personal theories, because of their invisibility, they are often not well understood, either intrapersonally or interpersonally. As early childhood education teachers work in teams, engaging in professional dialogue is a means for teachers to develop both self-awareness, and understanding of their colleagues' values. This promotes greater team-work, while alleviating the tension that may form within a teaching team if conflicting personal theories are not well understood.

REFLECTION AND PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE

Reflecting on practice is considered to be an integral part of being an early childhood teacher (Broadley & Fagan, 2010). It allows teachers to self-assess practice, to ensure practice is consistent with beliefs, and to consider new possibilities that renew individual teaching practice. Although reflecting on practice is an important part of professional responsibility, it is often conducted on an individual basis in isolation, and so ignores the socio-cultural perspective (Smidt, 2009) that explains thinking and learning as occurring on a social plane amongst people. By engaging in professional dialogue, a professional learning environment is created that allows teaching teams to explore values, beliefs and practices in a way that goes beyond the reflections that are possible for each individual teacher.

Professional dialogue can be considered as dialogue with a purpose, as it provides opportunities for teachers to engage in analytical discussions about teaching that extend on conversation about the daily routines. It can be considered

as professional learning that is situated within a workplace context and highlights the importance of dialogue about authentic situations and events, so that teachers cannot retreat to the safety of abstract theories and words about which naïve and superficial agreements can be made (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008). As many aspects of a teacher's day become taken-for-granted, dialogue creates opportunities where teachers are exposed to ideas and insights about which they may not have been previously aware or that may offer a different perspective (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). In doing this, it provides teachers with another perspective on teaching practice. Hence, dialogue should be seen as more than communication, but as a process where there is no defined outcome and the end result is unknown (Rinaldi, 2006), but which can enhance professional identity and practice.

In this way, regular engagement in professional dialogue can create a culture of reflection and professional learning within a teaching team. By creating an opportunity to share thinking about teaching practice, professional dialogue provides a structure for support and mentoring within a team, while engaging teachers in problem-solving, constructing change and improvement strategies in a way that builds professional knowledge, cohesiveness and leadership amongst the team.

While it is easy to appreciate the benefits professional dialogue affords in theory, other writers have noted that while early childhood education teachers constantly negotiate minor aspects of their teaching role while on the job (Nuttall, 2003), difficulties are experienced while articulating their philosophies and examining their practice in depth (Cullen, 2009; Fleer, 2003; MacNaughton, 2003; Nuttall, 2003). This is echoed by one of the teachers who participated in this study, who said, 'It was just such a hard thing to do!'.

To participate in dialogue confidently, teachers must have a professional knowledge base as well as an awareness of the implicit values and beliefs that shape their interpersonal and intrapersonal judgements (Goodfellow, 2003; Wood & Bennett, 2000). Although professional knowledge is partly formed by gaining a professional qualification, there are many aspects of teaching in an early childhood context, such as the complex relational dimension of teaching that can be difficult to teach in a formal educational setting of teacher education (Nuttall & Edwards, 2009). Dialogue about aspects such as the complex relationships between children, families and teachers that form the basis of any interaction in an early childhood centre can inform and strengthen teaching practice. Professional dialogue can enhance teacher agency by creating a new form of professional learning that emphasises the importance of care, relationships and wisdom (Dalli & Cherrington, 2009) as an integral part of an early childhood teachers' identity.

Sharing thoughts on personal experiences blends reflection on practice, theory and experience, but it can also cause anxiety (Fook & Askelund, 2007). Amongst the four teachers who participated in the dialogue that formed the basis of this article, anxiety arose for a variety of reasons. For one teacher, anxiety was aroused by the awareness of being a newly qualified teacher in comparison to her more experienced colleagues, for another it was the fact that she was the supervisor and was anxious about the possibility of her practice being found wanting by the staff she managed. For yet another, the anxiety stemmed from not wanting to upset other colleagues when discussing their philosophy and teaching practice. The participating teachers also reported that they felt anxiety in case the words and phrases they used were misinterpreted and judged negatively. One result of the discussion process was that teachers reported that they used words

more thoughtfully as a result of having participated in professional dialogue of this kind, and were more aware of the nuances of language used to articulate teaching practice. The anxieties of these four teachers were short-lived as the teachers felt their views were listened to and respected. This indicates that, although teachers may initially experience difficulty, if they are placed in a situation where they are expected to articulate personal values and philosophy to examine their practice, including the use of language, they can rise to the challenge and will benefit from it.

This indicates that in seeking to engender professional dialogue a trusting context needs to be created where teachers feel safe in discussing their teaching practice and comfortable in giving and receiving constructive and honest feedback. For teachers to feel confident enough to participate in self-review where they engage in dialogue and may experience discomfort, a respectful caring attitude must exist (Meyer, Ashburner, & Holman, 2006) that ensures teachers are not so threatened that they are rendered silent (Stark, 2006). Teachers need to be trusted to form their own interpretations of practice in a way that is meaningful to them so they can control and own any shift of thinking (Dewar & Sharp, 2006). Additionally, any comments made must be accepted not as personal judgements or criticism but as alternative perceptions that can provide a basis for discussion and further learning. For teachers to be motivated to participate, they must be able to perceive that the gain of participating outweighs any initial discomfort and anxiety.

CREATING A TRUSTING ENVIRONMENT

A trusting environment that supports professional dialogue is formed largely by attitude to dialogue and the atmosphere that is created throughout the discussion. The purpose of professional dialogue should ultimately be the critique of practice that results in improvement of teaching practice. This can be facilitated through a caring manner of adopting an attitude to critical thinking that relishes participating in dialogue with others, especially those unlike ourselves. Here, criticality depends on individual traits, such as respect, tolerance and caring, as critical thinking is viewed mainly as a social process whereby theories are constructed or reinterpreted through social interactions with others. From this perspective, improvements or changes to practice are achieved through striving for greater understanding, inclusion of alternative viewpoints and by encouraging participation (Burbules & Berk, 1999).

A culture of listening is crucial to the process as listening transforms an individual monologue into an inter-subjective discussion. In order for an opinion or a personal theory to exist and be legitimised it needs to be narrated and listened to by others (Rinaldi, 2006). Listening can be viewed on several levels: the concrete act of listening so what has been said by another can be heard and answered; listening to one's inner voice in the form of a thought or reflection; and, listening to others to denote sensitivity and openness to ideas other than one's own. Listening can also be viewed as a metaphor for respect and a willingness to cooperate, as well as a recognition that others have a right to hold views that contradict one's own (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Rinaldi, 2006).

To ensure a trusting environment exists that is conducive to professional dialogue, certain strategies can be employed. Such an environment can be nurtured by forming explicit rules that are agreed on by all participants. Through engaging in dialogue, a situation may arise where dominance and power over others may be present, so ground rules should be made at the beginning of the

dialogue, such as that only one person talks at a time without interruption. Ground rules such as these should ensure equity of participation in the dialogue, as well as allowing each individual the opportunity to question their thinking, express their views and change their viewpoint without feeling defensive or compelled to needlessly defend their former stance. In this way, an *argument culture* is avoided where discussion can become a rigid two-sided debate where only one side can be right and neither side reneges (Fook & Askelund, 2007). The ground rules should ensure that differences of opinion are seen as a chance for mutual engagement and further learning, not as *an argument.* One of the teachers who participated in the study that informed this article emphasised the importance of this, by stating that because a safe environment had been created the teachers were more likely to participate in a similar process in the future.

In contrast, the workplace cultures that would inhibit dialogue are cultures of silence and workplace cultures that are overly concerned with mindless compliance to regulations. A culture of silence is one that constructs teaching as a private activity where open dialogue is avoided. A culture of silence is further characterised by individualism, where collaborative action is avoided and each individual teacher stoically persists with difficulty on their own, and by secrecy, where self-disclosure is avoided and mistakes are covered up. If these features exist in an early childhood centre, the synergy that can result from dialogue amongst the team is lost. If a centre is overly concerned with procedures and regulations, while overlooking critical reflection and dialogue, teachers may be more prone to try to teach *the right way.* This could contribute to teachers' anxieties, as the teachers may become overly defensive and reluctant to express their views to the group for fear of criticism, negative judgement and disapproval (Fook & Askelund, 2007).

THE CHALLENGE OF TIME

In addition to creating a trusting environment, evidence suggests (Walker, 2009) that time must be deliberately put aside for professional dialogue to result in shifts of thinking about practice. For many teachers time is a challenge that takes many guises. Firstly, the teachers themselves must be willing to invest time in professional dialogue, and secondly, there is the challenge for teachers to find the time to meet together. Although there is evidence that reflection and discussion by teachers support effective learning outcomes for children, surveys have found that lack of time was a major constraint to reflective practice (Mitchell & Brooking, 2007). Often while early childhood teachers themselves regard time away from teaching as an opportunity for collaboration to enrich their teaching practices, management retains an industrial view that perceives this time as time for completing administrative tasks linked to compliance (Searle, 2008).

Despite the difficulties, even a short amount of time for professional dialogue can be valuable for teachers. In the United Kingdom a group of play therapists put aside one hour a week to meet and discuss their work. To ensure the time was spent productively, the group carefully structured a programme. Each group member took turns to bring an observation based on their work, this was read aloud and then discussed by the group. These teachers considered this process offered emotional support for the play therapists while providing formative feedback which assisted them to form new understandings of practice. In addition, it was felt the weekly meetings acted as a quality control group where the group

could challenge either institutional practices based on policies or individual practices founded on prejudices with a view to improvement (Walker, 2009). This study from the United Kingdom indicates that while it is difficult making the time for professional dialogue, even a short amount of time is worthwhile.

TEACHER IDENTITY AND AGENCY

The four Aotearoa New Zealand teachers in this study volunteered to participate in professional dialogue. Their readiness and willingness to engage in professional dialogue suggested that it was compatible with, and contributed to, their professional self-concept and identity. One of the teachers commented on how participating in professional dialogue had contributed to her professionalism and personal identity by provoking continued interest in teaching. As she said, 'You could not stop learning and stick at a job day in and day out!'.

In recent years the government initiatives referred to earlier in this article have intended to professionalize early childhood teachers. It should be recognised that the image of teacher professionalism that is presented in the regulations and other documents of regulating bodies such as the New Zealand Teachers Council present a particular view or discourse of a professional – that of accountability to an external standard (Urban, 2008). There is a danger in allowing these standards to govern early childhood education teachers if they are used solely to assess a teacher's compliance and conformity to external norms of practice as this could result in a teacher becoming a mechanistic teacher-as-technician who lacks agency (Appleby, 2010).

The four teachers who participated in the dialogue that provided the evidence for this article reflected on and discussed their personal philosophies and values so as to interrogate the ways that these impacted on the dynamic environment of the centre and the interactive processes between teachers and children, the environment and the community. The dialogue necessarily involved reflection on professional identity, and feedback given by the teachers at the completion of the process showed that this aspect was valued by the teachers. The teachers listed the following as positives: the opportunity to reflect on their practice; the chance to see connections between philosophy (beliefs and values) and actual interactions with children and gain insight into this; team-building; forging stronger relationships and better understanding of each other; and, a time of fellowship, ideas, contribution and belonging. The teachers also began to see research on teaching practice as an important part of their professional identity. Commenting on this, one teacher said, 'Are there any true answers when there are so many perspectives and ways of seeing and doing?', while another wondered, 'Are we all living researchers?'.

Teacher agency has been defined as the capacity of the teacher to apply 'knowledge, skills, understandings and dispositions in professional practice contexts' (Turnbull, 2005, p. 207), as well as a sense of autonomy combined with moral responsibility and intentional action. This requires a constant monitoring not only of personal actions, but also the physical and social aspects of an environment in order to assess both one's own and others competence (Paris & Lung, 2008). It has also been suggested that teacher agency is not an individual attribute that is inherent in teachers but results from the position and location of teachers in relation to the cultural discourses that construct them (Fenech, Sumison & Shepherd, 2010). Teachers who act with personal agency act with

intention and moral responsibility to achieve goals that are meaningful to them. Hence teacher agency implies the ability to see possibilities and alternatives, to use initiative, to be mindful and intentional within the constraints of the context in which one is working. Teacher agency requires a capacity for self-regulation, self-reflection and persistence. It could also be assumed that it would be nurtured by regular opportunities to engage in professional dialogue so that teachers can construct their own shifts of thinking that are more meaningful to the specific context in which they teach and are more than the result of compliance to external guidelines.

SUMMARY

This article discussed professional dialogue as an important aspect of professionalism for early childhood teachers. By drawing on the experiences of a teaching team of four early childhood teachers who had participated in dialogue, it demonstrated the challenges, such as anxiety and lack of time, that were faced throughout the discussions. A discussion of how these challenges could be alleviated was also included. The measures that allowed the teachers to feel more comfortable to participate were the forming of ground rules to guide the discussion, building a trusting environment based on respect and listening where differences were seen as an opportunity to learn, rather than a reason to argue and defend an inflexible position. Although time remains a challenge in most early childhood settings it was shown that even an hour a week can be gainfully employed to engage in dialogue to reflect on and enhance teaching practice. In general, teachers were eager to take part in professional dialogue if they perceived the benefits outweighed any discomfort. The benefits were perceived as a greater understanding of colleagues, team building, being able to connect teaching philosophy to teaching practice in a meaningful way, and a chance to reflect on and gain fresh insights into teaching practice. The teachers also began to see themselves as researchers of their own and their colleagues' teaching practice and so extended their professional identity as one they could shape themselves. Similarly, the professional dialogue and the discussion on practice came to be viewed not as a cause for anxiety but an opportunity for an alternative form of professional learning. For these reasons, this article contends that engaging in professional dialogue is an aspect of professionalism that is worthy of further consideration.

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