



Peer-reviewed paper

A pedagogy of passion: Working with infants in early childhood education

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The Ministry of Education statistics show that, between 2000 and 2015 in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the rise in under two year olds participating in early childhood services grew by 53% (Education Review Office, 2015). This is a significant growth and, as this area of early childhood education is still developing and changing, it is an area where research needs to be considered to ensure that we are providing quality care and education for infants. This article reports on research undertaken in regard to teachers implementing the RIE (Resources for Infant Educators) philosophy developed by Magda Gerber in two early childhood settings in New Zealand. As a major finding from this research, teacher identity is considered in the way in which identity is formed through the influence of both personal and professional identity, and the importance of this identity formation for ensuring quality practices in ECE is discussed.

Introduction

The Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) philosophy, developed by Magda Gerber in the United States, is increasingly becoming a way in which teachers in Aotearoa/New Zealand are considering their practices with infants in early childhood settings (Christie, 2010). Key to this philosophy are the values of respect and relationships in an unhurried and calm environment with a strong child centred focus (Gerber, 2002; Gerber & Johnson, 1998). The research project reported on here looked at how the vital role of parents and family are supported, both in their understanding and in the implementation of this philosophy in early childhood centres, with a focus on infants under the age of one. It also sought to consider how the relationship between the teacher and parents is formed, and whether this supports consistency between home and centre for infants in care.

Methodology

The overarching research aim for this study was broken down into three research questions to enable the unpacking of the complex nature of teacher and parent relationships in an early childhood centre. The overall research aimed to better understand *how teachers' and parents' perceptions align with the RIE philosophy and practice in New Zealand Early Childhood settings*. This was broken down into three research questions which are: (i) What are teachers' perceptions of the connection between home and centre within the RIE philosophy? (ii) What are parents' and teachers' perceptions of their roles within the RIE philosophy? And, (iii) how do teachers foster parents' understanding of the RIE philosophy? A fourth question, which was not intended at the outset of this research project, but



emerged during the data collection and analysis is: Which aspects contributed to a successful implementation of the RIE philosophy in this early childhood setting?

A qualitative methodological approach to the research was taken, which focused on gaining perceptions from both teacher and parent interviews, as well as document analysis of relevant centre material. According to Arghode (2012), using a qualitative approach allows researchers to look at the perceptions of the participants, and their experiences around a topic, to gain an insight into how a phenomenon has been experienced. Due to the aim of this study to explore the perceptions of the teachers and parents, their understanding of the RIE philosophy and how it is translated into practice, a qualitative methodology underpinned by interpretivism and phenomenological theory was used as a framework. The data collected was coded and analysed to highlight major themes emerging from the data, which were 'Teacher Identity' and 'Relationships.' From here, the discussion focused on these two main themes as key ways to consider changes and development in early childhood education, including the importance of the connection between philosophy and practice, and considering how relationships support this connection. This article focuses on teacher identity in relation to RIE philosophy and how this relates to and influences quality practice and pedagogy for infants and toddlers.

Teacher identity

In both the teacher and parent data, evidence can be found that the influence and practices of the RIE philosophy were central to the way in which teachers and parents interacted in the contexts studied. Teachers reported that they are clear and confident in the way they practice, and they showed commitment and passion for their roles. It became clear that the implementation of the RIE philosophy, and the way in which this supported the relationship between teachers and parents, has been successful in these centre settings. This provoked the question of: why was it successful? In the findings, one of the major themes that emerged, and which was considered as a key factor for a successful implementation of RIE, is teacher identity. Based on the responses of the participating teacher, it can be argued that the identity of the teacher and their underlying values and beliefs around relationships have a huge influence on the success of implementing the RIE philosophy. Looking at this more broadly, the argument is that it is not necessarily the 'RIE philosophy' that has affected the positive findings of this research project, but the personal and professional values that form the identity of the teachers and their stated personal connection to the RIE philosophy. The research showed that the teachers were able to articulate their identity within their philosophies, and being able to put them into practice authentically. This connection is key to quality when caring for infants in early childhood education (Rockel, 2003, 2005).

This theme emerged in the way the interviewed teachers talked about the influence of what they perceived as their own identity, their previous study, personal experiences, as well as their professional relationships and practices as influential aspects of what it means to 'be a RIE teacher'. It became evident through their responses that the teachers had taken on this approach completely. For many, it was not something that they 'became' during their time in the centres, it was something that they embraced and lived in all aspects of their lives – it was considered their way of 'being'.



Teacher identity is an area that has been increasingly noted in research, considering how and what influences the way teachers engage with children, and ways in which their underlying values and beliefs about teaching impact on their understanding of pedagogy within the early childhood context (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; Gibson, 2013; Thomas, 2012). The identity of a teacher has been described as an essential aspect of their teaching practice, and one that is developed through teachers reflecting on and making sense of who they are in their roles as early childhood teachers. This process of identity forming is fluid and evolves and changes throughout a teaching career (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; Gibson, 2013). While many different ways in which identity is formed by teachers have been suggested, there is a common belief that there are two main contributors to this: the personal values, beliefs, and experiences of the teacher; and the professional knowledge and experience gained through their teacher education and practice (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; Egan, 2007; Gibson, 2013; Pearce & Morrison, 2011). The notions of personal and professional identity are considered below in relation to how they were seen in the research project and connected to literature.

Personal identity

During this research project, the personal relationship that the teachers had with the RIE philosophy and how this impacted on their identity as a teacher emerged as a major influence on both their choice of current teaching roles and the purpose of their teaching. The majority of the teachers in this study identified the RIE philosophy as fitting with who they are as a person, which, in turn, means they are able to teach in a way that aligns with their own personal values and beliefs. This personal connection was noted as something that was experienced during both their own childhood and their time as student teachers.

The personal identity of a teacher is comprised of the experiences, values and beliefs they have, and which they bring into the teaching profession. It influences their expectations and feelings about 'teaching' and their role as teachers. Chang-Kredl and Kingsley (2014) undertook research with student teachers, looking at the way in which their memories and experiences had impacted on their decision to become an early childhood teacher. They indicated that students entering the teacher education programmes entered with "strongly set beliefs, attitudes and preconceptions of what teaching and being a teacher means" (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014, p. 29). This highlights the importance of recognising how past experience influences the initial identity of an early childhood teacher and consideration of how this can be supported through the creation of a professional identity. In line with this, there also needs to be consideration of the motivation of teachers entering the profession, and how their motivation for becoming a teacher shapes the identity that they are forming as a professional.

Personal identity is crucial to consider, as this recognises the values and beliefs of the teachers, and the role these values and beliefs play in the formation of their professional identity. One of the most significant findings in relation to this was that the teachers were very aware of their own personal identity and the role that it played when implementing the RIE philosophy in their teaching practice.



Professional identity

In this research project, the participating teachers emphasised the importance of working as part of a team of teachers, and they made clear links to the way in which their colleagues and the centre context validated their personal identity, which impacted on the formation of their professional identity. The importance of professional identity has been shown to be vital to all aspects of teaching in the early childhood context, as suggested by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) who state that identity is “at the core of the teaching profession” (p. 178). The professional identity of an early childhood teacher encompasses the personal values and beliefs discussed previously, as well as the combination of knowledge, skills and expertise that are gained through teacher education and during their teaching practice (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Thomas, 2012).

Lately, early childhood education has developed and gained recognition as a profession. This recognition comes with a code of ethics and expectations about practices teachers engage in. These expectations include gaining qualifications, building relationships and being accountable to governing agencies influencing the sector (Thomas, 2012). Due to the relational nature of working in the context of early childhood education and the focus on care encompassed in a teacher’s role, it is often difficult for early childhood teachers to combine the expectations of being a professional and their personal values and beliefs to create their own identity as a teacher (Gibson, 2013; Thomas, 2012). This development of identity for teachers is a way for them to locate themselves within the professional context and offers ways in which teachers can understand the expectations of them in regards to how to be and act within their roles as early childhood teachers (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014). This identity formation process is impacted by the relationships that are formed with other teachers in the sector, parents, children and communities of learning, which impact on the way in which a teacher sees and experiences early teaching practice (Pearce & Morrison, 2011).

Another key way in which professional identity is formed is through the teacher education programmes that are supporting teachers in their studies to consider their identity. However, research tells us that the way in which this is done needs to be considered to ensure that teachers are having opportunities to look closely at and develop their professional identity (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014).

Teacher identity within the Aotearoa/New Zealand context

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, there is a commitment to ensuring that both Pakeha and Māori values and beliefs are reflected in education. The research outlined above highlights the strong importance of past experiences, relationships and values, and how these shape the personal identity and subsequently impact on the professional identity of a person (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; Pearce & Morrison, 2011). These ideas connect in some ways with the view of kaupapa Māori, which considers identity as integral and being influenced by not only a person’s own experiences, values and beliefs but also those of the wider whānau and iwi (Fraser, 2004; Rameka, 2015). The connection that Māori have with their identity is shown through the creation and intent of Kohanga Reo in Aotearoa/New Zealand, which is underpinned by the values and beliefs in te ao Māori. When considering the philosophies of RIE and kaupapa



Māori, it is noteworthy that Helen May has already discussed the relationship between these in 1991 during the 5th Early Childhood Convention, where she presented on her experiences with RIE at that time. May (1991) reflected on the unique place of Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand and stated that, at this time, Kohanga Reo (full immersion Māori early childhood centre) was overall the closest form of a philosophy when working with infants and toddlers within early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and that, “like the very different RIE and Loczy models, there are clear goals, principles and rationales that underpin practice” (May, 1991, p. 290). While this does not imply that these models are similar in practice, it indicates the importance of a strong underlying pedagogy when working with infants and toddlers in early childhood education. She also highlighted the important place of a teacher’s philosophy of practice and how this is a vital aspect of working with infants within the context of early childhood education. When reflecting on the students that she was teaching at the time, she highlighted the connection between philosophy and practice as the most important aspect needed to be considered for the future.

I hope in the years to come as some of these students work with infant/toddlers, that they articulate a sound philosophy of practice in their interaction that they see beyond everyday methodology and practice to understand and critique the rationale and philosophy of the centre programme; and that they eventually can take responsibility and manage a programme (May, 1991, p. 300).

These words for the future, nearly 25 years on, need to be considered in relation to how teachers working in early childhood settings are ensuring that their philosophies are well developed, that these philosophies reflect their identity, and that this translates into their teaching practice.

Towards a pedagogy of passion

The key findings of the teacher interviews that relate to the theme of ‘Teacher Identity’ have shown connections between the identity of the teachers and how this impacts and influences all of the interactions and practices in their teaching roles creating a way of ‘being’. The relationships with both children and parents, and the way in which these are built on respect and care, come from the personal values and beliefs of these teachers and their ability to connect these strongly to their professional identity as a teacher working with the RIE philosophy. It could be argued that, without the underpinning of the teacher’s personal identity, and the ability to align this so closely with their professional identity, the outcomes would not be the same - which supports the earlier discussion of ‘teacher identity’ as being a vital key aspect of teaching practice.

The importance of a pedagogy supported by theory underlying the practice of early childhood teachers is not a new concept. May (1991) spoke about observations of the RIE philosophy and stated that, compared to practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand, “there was also a clearer consciousness of the notion of a philosophy of practice” (p. 292). During this research project, it has become clear that the teachers, too, had this clear link between their pedagogy and the ways in which this is practised in the centre. Perhaps it can be concluded that teachers who connect or align to a philosophy of teaching outside of the mainstream may have stronger connections between philosophy and practice, due to the ongoing education and professional development to implement this



approach, which could challenge them to make these strong connections. A relevant example of relationship based practice that has been indicated in the reviewed literature is that of 'primary caregiving'.

Due to the principles of the RIE philosophy being centred around intimate relationships, centres who practice RIE almost always use a 'primary care' or a 'key teacher' system between children and teachers (Bernhardt, 2000; Christie, 2010, 2011; Dalli, Kibble, Cairns-Cowan, Corrigan, & McBride, 2009; McCaleb & Mikaere-Wallis, 2005). Primary caregiving was developed and teachers "assigned responsibility for a specific number of children, taking the principal role in their care" (Rockel, 2003, p. 113). This practice is said to support the teachers in building authentic relationships with both children and parents and supporting the overall development of children through the intimate connection that is developed (Christie, 2010; Dalli et al., 2009; McCaleb & Mikaere-Wallis, 2005).

A primary care model was implemented in both centres where the research has been undertaken, and, during the interviews with parents, a range of perceptions of this practice was reported on. One parent did not feel that primary caregiving was necessary, and two felt that it was good but they were not looking for it. A fourth parent was looking for primary care, however, felt that her daughter had built strong relationships with all teachers and that it was no longer important. This difference in understanding was also noted in research undertaken by Rockel (2003; 2005), who conducted qualitative research in centres using the primary caregiving model. When interviewing parents, she found that "parents' priorities may involve intuition regarding centre choice rather than understanding centre structures and philosophies" (Rockel, 2003, p. 123). During this research project, a very similar finding emerged around parents' 'intuition' and the 'feeling' of the centre. However, if research shows that the practices and the philosophy are not necessarily the reasons for parents enrolling in these settings, then we have to ask: what about these settings is appealing to the 'intuition' of parents? I would argue that the answer lies in the underlying *pedagogy of passion* which centres around how relationships and respect are embedded within the philosophy, rather than structural aspects such as primary caregiving.

Some literature portrays primary caregiving as a practice that supports infants in positive ways (Christie, 2010, 2011; Dalli et al., 2009); however, Rockel's (2003; 2005) research also suggests that these positive relationships can also be built in settings that use team approaches. Here, it is also necessary to consider the specific context of Aotearoa/New Zealand and the views of more collective approaches, such as Kaupapa Māori, in relation to working with infants and toddlers in group settings. One can hardly doubt that relationships are key when working with infants and toddlers; it can be considered as non-negotiable and the right of an infant to have these relationships with caregivers. The findings of this research project align in this context with the work of Rockel (2003; 2005), in which she advocates for a pedagogy of relationships when working with infants, and for teachers to be more consciously connected to their pedagogies. Rockel (2003) states that "the professional role of the teacher demands dialogue and constant reflection on practice in order to make informed choices and to examine complex issues critically" (p. 124). Similarly, in the research project reported on here, the vital importance of teachers understanding and connecting with their pedagogies of teaching has been shown to make a strong impact on the practices and relationships that are built. A passionate relationship-based pedagogy is key to ensuring quality for infants; however, it is argued that, first, teachers must be able



to connect to their personal identity, values, and beliefs and have these acknowledged in a professional context to underpin the relationships and pedagogy that they practice.

Teachers' roles and responsibilities

In the context of a pedagogy of passion as outlined above, early childhood teachers must begin to challenge themselves to look more at their identity and consider how this supports their philosophy and practice. It has been discussed above that, when teachers are able to develop their personal identity within their pedagogy of teaching, this impacts on the connections made and the passion of the teacher for their role (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; Egan, 2009; Gibson, 2013). It has also been shown that outcomes for infants in care are better when there are teachers who understand infant development and can connect this to practice (Angus & Carroll-Lind, 2011; Dalli et al., 2011). To move forward, teachers should look carefully at how they are supporting the vital relationships in their infants' settings, including structural ways in which this is supported. Teachers should aim to educate themselves on current pedagogy, such as RIE, brain development, attachment theory and relationship based pedagogy, to find a way to practice that aligns with their context and, most importantly, as part of their pedagogy of teaching. If teachers understand the theory and how this relates to practice, one would assume that the decisions they make are intentional, rather than leaving successful relationships to chance. As McCaleb and Mikaere-Wallis (2005) state, "We must get serious as a sector about prioritising relationships in early childhood centres" (p. 24). Part of the sector are the initial teacher educators who play a significant part in the initial formation of teacher identity.

Initial teacher education

The teachers in this research identified their initial teacher educators as the beginnings of their journey with the RIE philosophy. Chalke (2013) discusses the role that initial teacher educators play in supporting the identity formation of teachers. She refers to literature which suggests that initial teacher education influences not only the knowledge and skills of an early childhood teacher but also their values. She states that "there is a significant role to be played by tutors ... who educate practitioners within higher education" (Chalke, 2013, p. 219). Teacher educators must act in conscious and deliberate ways to both ensure that student teachers are developing the theory and knowledge specifically needed to work with infants, and to highlight and ensure that connections between philosophy and practice are evident (Rockel, 2003, 2005). One aspect in this context is the influence of government and policy makers on both teachers and initial teacher educators.

The role of policy on teacher education and identity

Research undertaken by Murray (2013) looked at identity formation with teachers and training, and she suggested that, like Simpson (2010, as cited in Murray, 2013), perhaps "there has been too much emphasis on the part that government discourse is playing in constructing professionalism" (p. 539). She suggests that the focus should be on teachers being active during their identity process. While



it is agreed that teachers need to be active in their identity formation, there is still a huge role that the government must play if we are to make changes to pedagogical practices influencing infants. In this research project, one of the constraints raised which impacted on implementing the RIE philosophy successfully was the ratios for children under two years old in New Zealand. Among others, policy makers need to continue to consider ratios, group size and qualifications as vital to building towards quality; without knowledgeable teachers (qualifications) who have the ability to work alongside infants (ratios) in a context that is able to support relationships (group size), this will be a difficult task.

Conclusion

It is clear from the findings and the discussion that the personal identity of the teachers influenced their connection to the RIE philosophy. This connection to the RIE philosophy impacted on their professional identity, and was evident in their understanding of the link between their pedagogy and the way that they practiced in their settings. The findings of this research project have shown the core aspect of identity as part of being a teacher within early childhood education. It has also been shown how these connections between identity, philosophy, and practice can be made and implemented into teaching practice. Further, when teachers are able to make these connections between pedagogy and practice, they can have an overwhelming positive impact on teachers, children and families.

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