

Wellington East kāhui ako: Starting our early childhood education community of learning

Ché Hancock | *BestStart Rongotai*

Emily Gott | *Newtown Early Learning Centre*

For the past nine months, a group of early childhood education services in the East Wellington region of New Zealand have joined together as a professional learning community to benefit the children in their services. This professional learning community is an affiliate group of the kāhui ako/community of learning known as Motu Kairangi. Being part of the Motu Kairangi has encouraged us to develop our own professional learning community, building unity and cohesion across the different early childhood centres with diverse philosophies. One of our first projects as a group was an inquiry to support the self-regulation and resilience of the four-year-old children in our region. This article explains the process we used to set up a professional learning community, in the hope of encouraging other early childhood education services to join together as professional learning groups to enhance all children's learning.

Let us start at the beginning

Kāhui ako/communities of learning are an initiative started by the Ministry of Education in 2014 ([MoE], 2017). According to this initiative, schools are separated into regions and encouraged to collaborate. In these kāhui ako/communities of learning, teachers take a leadership role and are invited to share their expertise with other teachers in the community to strengthen learners outcomes. Within this structure, early childhood education (ECE) services have a significant place and are able to access funding for professional learning opportunities.

For most of our ECE services, transitioning children from early childhood to primary schooling is a constant and ever-changing process. For example, as more children from families with English as an additional language attend ECE services, there is a growing demand for targeted learning support for these children before they transition to schooling. Another significant challenge for us within the East Wellington region is that our children and families are spread across a wide spectrum of ECE services and schools. Consequently, rather than there being a consistent route for children from one centre into one school, the children can come from multiple centres and transition into a choice of schools. This makes the centre and school relationship even more important for our kaiako/teachers.

The purpose of an early childhood education professional learning community

We began our professional learning group by getting to know each other and in the process establish the guiding values and expectations for our group. The New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (MoE, 2017, p. 59) encourages teachers to "keep close together, not far apart" and for many of us, this journey supported and strengthened this belief. After we established the group, many of us began the conversation around transitions, as we believed this was the sole focus of the kāhui ako/community of learning affiliated groups. However, we soon realised that our professional learning group had a far greater influence and scope than first thought.

The following quote suggested to our group by a Ministry of Education facilitator, captured this sentiment and was used as a grounding statement for kaiako/teachers as we moved forward.

[A] professional learning community is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all children's learning (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006, p. 223).

As we continued, we realised that while our focus remained with transitions and supporting school readiness for our tamariki/children, we could explore other areas of need in the community. This prompted us to consider the implications of having a wider reach and being able to problem solve much more effectively for all children in our realms of influence.

What does a good professional learning community look like? What is needed?

A good professional learning community has a shared vision and values that enable participants to be clear about the purpose of their community. Much of the current literature suggests that leadership should be shared and supportive and that the learning community take ownership of its professional learning and development. Moreover, it is recognised that a good professional learning community will have a specific focus on positive learning outcomes (Cherrington & Thornton 2015).

Our professional learning community currently has a shared vision and values that align effortlessly with the vision and values of our school counterparts. In addition, a core leadership team supports our group in their decision-making and directs and guides us. We are in the final stages of a 2019 plan for our professional learning and development and are working with an expert partner who will prompt us to be forward thinking and directive towards positive learning outcomes for the tamariki/children in our region.

Our inquiry process: School readiness, transitions to school, self-regulation and resilience in four-year olds

After we formed our professional learning group and gained an understanding of our purpose, we chose a focus: transitions from centre to school. The first task that was delegated equally amongst the team, was to contact local new entrant teachers. We wanted to explore their aspirations for children coming into their classrooms, including what they considered important for the transitioning children, and what professional advice they could offer to parents of transitioning children. As ECE teachers, we also shared with them examples from our own centres of how we supported the transition process, the ways we gathered parents' feedback, aspirations and how we shared children's learning. We also discussed the implications of this process for their journey once actually in schools. This led to the creation of a resource in which all the interviews with the teachers and the exemplars and information were compiled together into one book.

It became apparent from the responses from new entrant teachers that they wanted children to be self-managing. Examples of this for children included being able to dress themselves, keeping their belongings in the correct place, having self-control during learning periods, and being able to ask adults questions. This concept of self-managing was not new for us as it was already a focus of our early childhood education services. Managing-self is also one of the five key competencies in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (MoE, 2007) and a follow on from the strand of Wellbeing in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). As the group began to discuss the data from the new entrant teachers, we realised that self-regulation and resilience also stood out strongly as focuses for four-year olds.

To gather more data from our sector, we created a survey for the teachers of the different services to elicit their voice. The results from this survey showed that our kaiako/teachers believe children are able to self-regulate and manage themselves well. It also showed the level of teaching that focuses on self-management and self-regulation skills, and

the importance many teachers in our centres place on making time in their busy days to support our children in these skills. This led to further research conducted into these topics. The creation of two further resources, one on self-regulation, and one on resilience was the outcomes of the research. Our inquiry is still ongoing, and the next stage for us as a group is to disseminate the research we have undertaken and to reflect on the changes that have occurred for our services as a result of the research. In 2019, a focus for us will be finding out where the group is likely to take the research next.

Working alongside our schools

As part of our journey as a group, our representatives have been developing strong relationships with the local schools. We know that the stronger the relationship between where a child comes from and where they are going to, the more chance of success for the child in their new environment. Our professional learning group has emerged from the communities of learning efforts already established by our school counterparts and as we have developed as a group, so has our relationship with the school kāhui ako.

Our ECE leaders were invited to be a part of stewardship meetings which the schools held, and recently this invitation has been extended to attend the principals' meetings that convene at the local schools. This has allowed us to be a part of the work that is going on in our schools to create continuity for children across the services they encounter. Such meetings are an effective way for teachers to link work from one sector into the other. These meetings provided us great insight into what is happening for primary school teachers and allowed them insight into what we are doing to prepare our children to join them in schools. We are confident being a part of this work and these meetings allow us to work smarter. The regular meetings provides the teachers and principles to share resources across sectors and services for the benefit of all children.

Advice for new early childhood education groups and kāhui ako

Our journey has been a unique one, driven by the dedication of our members, the openness of our lead principal in the school kāhui ako/community of learning, and the number of services that make up our group. While we have made some good progress and laid solid ground work in our early days in this process, we are excited for what the coming months will bring as we work alongside the schools, grow our own professional learning group and put some real focus on meeting outcomes of quality teacher practice and learning outcomes for children.

When giving advice to new professional learning community groups, one of the key factors we would suggest is to start with establishing a united vision of where you want to go and what you want to achieve. It is also important to look at the unique community that surrounds the services in your region and examine the particular needs of the children and families. Having a sound and collaborative understanding of the values and vision that lead that group will provide the community with a solid base so that all the discussions and learning can be referred back to these endorsed values. We advise groups not to be afraid to maintain the beliefs they hold in order to create real benefit for the outcomes of children. As kāhui ako/communities of learning develop across New Zealand, it is exciting to see the emphasis the education system is putting on collaboration and unity, for all children to succeed.

References

- Cherrington, S., & Thornton, K., (2015). The nature of professional learning communities in New Zealand early childhood education: An exploratory study. *Professional Development in Education, 41*(2), 310-328.
- Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum for English-medium teaching and learning in years 1-13*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2017). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.
- Ministry of Education. (2017). *Communities of learning: Kāhui ako*. Retrieved from <https://www.education.govt.nz/communities-of-learning/>
- Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. (2006). Professional learning communities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change, 7*, 221–258.