

## Teachers as leaders supporting an emotionally safe climate in early childhood education.

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As the importance for emotional wellbeing in early childhood teaching is increasing, navigating ways to extend and promote positive teacher wellness becomes an occurring, current issue that teachers as leaders can benefit from more awareness of. Teachers in early childhood environments ideally would thrive in leadership opportunities provided, once they are established in their teaching. Moreover, current research and initiatives suggest that if teachers have a good sense of awareness of their own wellbeing, leadership capabilities will improve (Education Council, 2018; Mahfouz et al., 2021). This article intends for teachers as leaders to understand the importance of emotionally safe environments and how addressing their own as well as other teachers' emotional wellbeing will develop their ability to professionally grow in their leadership. Further to this, the article examines three dispositions; contribution, resilience and connection, that teachers can implement and reflect on as leaders in order to become advocates for creating emotionally safe environments.

### Introduction

Leaders and teachers' capabilities to lead continues to be examined in a range of ways and can vary in different education settings. As discussed by the Education Council (2018), teachers who lead effectively grow in their connections and relationships with the teaching teams, whānau, tamariki and the communities with a focus on compliance and operations being a lower priority. As indicated by the *Leadership Strategy for the teaching profession of Aotearoa New Zealand* (Education Council, 2018), all kaiako need to have an opportunity to develop their leadership skills. However, for kaiako to feel competent and capable in their own leadership abilities as leaders, they need to develop greater emotional awareness to support professional wellbeing for themselves and for other kaiako. This article suggests how kaiako can create emotionally safe climates in order to support the individual and collective wellness of all kaiako within early childhood settings (Education Council, 2018). While discussing an emotionally safe climate can be complex, the intention of this article is to stimulate discussion between leadership and teachers regarding their emotional wellbeing.

### The importance of an emotionally safe climate in early childhood education

Research suggests that a positive emotional climate supports equitable outcomes for all learners to be engaged and be motivated to learn (Harvey, et al., 2012; Harvey & Evans, 2003; Yan et al., 2011). Further to this, Jeon et al., (2018) shared that in education, "a positive workplace environment, which promotes staff members' mental health, is particularly important because teachers primarily set the tone for the classroom learning environment" (p. 55). Considering that the vision for the *Leadership Strategy/Rautaki Kaihautū* (Education Council, 2018) directly

links to achieving excellence for all learners, becoming aware of the emotional climate in the classroom then emerges as an important aspect in increasing leadership capabilities. Zinsser et al. (2016) suggest a range of factors that can impact on the emotional climate which relate closely to the teaching team's own emotional safety, such as how supported ngā kaiako feel in their role, working conditions, relational contentions and the workload. If these factors are impacted negatively, it can lead to low job satisfaction, low commitment and eventually burnout for teachers and consequently affect the emotional climate (Gagnon et al., 2019; McCullough et al., 2022; Zinsser, et al., 2016). If a teacher comes into their education setting feeling emotionally exhausted and is not aware of a decrease in their own sense of wellbeing, the environment could also become negative or chaotic (Jeon et al., 2018). Therefore, an emotionally safe climate in an education setting may be seen as one where everyone in the environment understands expectations and kaiako are open and honest with one another. The educational environment becomes a community of trust and understanding between kaiako and tamariki (Yan et al., 2011). Furthermore, an emotionally safe climate creates a sense of collaboration where everyone feels motivated to be responsible, accountable and appreciative of one another (Alt, 2022).

### **Teachers as leaders: Professional wellbeing**

Teachers' sense of professional wellbeing for themselves and for other kaiako can be reflected in their level of emotional awareness. McMullen et al. (2018) discuss elements that achieve professional wellbeing, which relate closely to being emotionally aware, such as security, self-respect, agency and self-efficacy. Additionally, a kaiako who portrays these elements can be confident of the quality of their practice, which can overall support self-awareness. Similarly, Mahfouz et al. (2021) explain in relation to professional wellbeing, that teachers as leaders will "improve efficacy by developing self-awareness, recognizing their own and others' emotions, and appreciating the role of emotions in leadership" (p. 340). Efficacy relates to the beliefs that a person has on their capabilities to be successful or unsuccessful in practical situations, which can then impact greatly on workplace pressures professionally and support emotional-regulation processes with themselves and others. The Education Council (2018) provides a professional perspective on teachers as leaders wellbeing through the *Leadership Strategy/Rautaki Kaihautū*, which aims for teachers to have leadership development opportunities and clarifies what is needed to sustain inspirational and powerful educational leaders. The *Leadership Strategy/Rautaki Kaihautū* focuses on areas such as *Capabilities of leadership* which supports teachers to become increasingly capable of engaging with learners, whānau, other kaiako and stakeholders, meaning the responsibility for connecting is on all kaiako, supporting the development of professional relationships. Furthermore, the area of *Personalised professional learning* aims for teachers to reflect on their wellness as learning opportunities are aimed at being responsive to their own individual aspirations and needs. Lastly, the area of *Building partnership, communities and networks* shares a strong focus on relational trust as a leader's purpose in order to promote cohesion and partnership within the educational setting. Through the professional areas of leadership, wellbeing is being clearly prioritised and valued highly for teachers as leaders (Education Council, 2018).

### **Emotional exhaustion**

Understanding emotional exhaustion can help kaiako to be more aware of their emotional wellbeing as well as others, particularly if they find they can relate with similar experiences or feelings. Emotional exhaustion can be described as being emotionally unavailable and unresponsive to relational connections (Ansari, et al., 2022). Furthermore, a teacher may find themselves unmotivated to engage in any forms of interactions with tamariki,

whānau and other kaiako, even when positive. Ansari et al. (2020) also share that emotional exhaustion is said to be the first indicator of possible teacher burnout, so being aware that this is happening to oneself, or another teacher can proactively support emotional safety for teachers. Jeon et al., (2018) suggest that emotional exhaustion comes from factors such as a lack of teaching efficacy and an unsuitable working environment. Interestingly, Jeon et al. (2018) also found that when teachers had higher levels of self-efficacy, they also showed higher levels of emotional exhaustion. As a possible explanation, teachers who are highly competent may put higher pressure on their performance. For example, they may feel responsible for supporting children with higher behavioural needs or may feel that other teachers are dependent on them for certain tasks (Jeon et al. 2018). Unsurprisingly, research agrees that the working environment, including operational and relational issues have a significant impact on how a teacher may feel (Ansari, et al., 2020; Jeon et al. 2018; Zinsser et al., 2016).

### **Leading an emotionally safe climate: Three dispositions**

According to the Education Council (2018), the role of the teacher as a leader supporting professional wellbeing can provide direction to mitigate the demands of the profession while creating safe working environments that aim to support learning environments for tamariki. Therefore, teachers could reflect on their ability to show their contribution to the working environment, promote resilience within their wellbeing and share connection with other kaiako, tamariki, whānau and stakeholders. These three dispositions serve to promote professional wellbeing. In early childhood education, dispositions are usually related to children's characteristics or attitudes to their learning (Ministry of Education, 2017). However, for the purpose of teachers developing as leaders who can support an emotionally safe climate, dispositions can also be a tool to reflect on teachers' abilities and serve as a way for teachers to become more emotionally aware of their own and others professional wellbeing.

### **Contribution | Mana Tangata:**

When kaiako are empowered to contribute their strengths, abilities and interests to the education setting, they have an opportunity to grow their awareness of the emotional climate in an early childhood environment. A leader's mindset starts to transition from being accountable for their own beliefs and values to being accountable for the collective and shared values that bring each kaiako together to make the team (Alt, 2022; Denee, 2018; Education Council, 2018; Skidmore, 2020;). This can then develop a sense of responsive cohesion that is felt when entering the educational climate, which overall advocates for collective wellness and combating emotional exhaustion. The Education Council (2018) shares that if teachers can reflect on their own knowledge and strengths, they can then take responsibility for different areas in the environment in order to grow in their contributions. This can then support kaiako to cultivate new areas of their practice, promoting professional learning opportunities. This way, kaiako feel valued in the leadership they bring and encourage others to lead in different areas, therefore building up their self-efficacy too.

### **Resilience | Manawaroa**

When kaiako have the opportunity to build their resilience, they increase in their adaptability and their responsiveness to their own and others' aspirations and values. Due to the unpredictable nature of an early childhood environment, teachers need to be capable of recovering quickly from challenging situations in order to continue to be consistent in their practice and avoid emotional exhaustion (Kwon et al., 2022; Skidmore, 2020). In addition, resilience in teachers is about the balance and stability they have in their commitment to their ongoing

professional practice (Gu & Day, 2013). Therefore, resilient leaders will support a sense of trust in their abilities from whānau, tamariki and other kaiako (Education Council, 2018). In order to grow resilience, kaiako need to consider the way in which they view situations that may be seen as negative (Dey et. al, 2021; Karagozoglu & Boydak-Ozan, 2022). Skidmore (2020) further shares that optimism can be self-taught through conscious positive inner thoughts, which can change the way that different situations or people can be perceived. Teachers who are resilient will find that their self-efficacy and ability to be emotionally aware of others needs will also strengthen because they understand how they respond appropriately and compassionately, empowering others in the process (Karagozoglu & Boydak-Ozan, 2022).

### **Connection | Hononga**

Overall, to encompass all relational dispositions, the value of connection can support leaders in advocating for the emotionally safe climate. Masterson (2015) even suggests that kaiako connections could be viewed like any long-term partnership and that the nature of these can be felt by others walking into an education space. Furthermore, if kaiako have strong relationships with other kaiako, they are able to offer personalised and individual support for their emotional wellbeing when needed (Alt, 2022; Gagon et al., 2019; Masterson, 2015). In order for kaiako to grow their connections, they need to keep communication open and provide positive feedback often. This communication can then lead to making effective shared decisions, thus supporting a distributed leadership approach to the education environment (Alt, 2022; Masterson, 2015). Durie (2015) also discusses how deeper connections enhance leadership capabilities by sharing that, if leaders are responsive to others' needs, they can understand how they can impact on the early childhood community for any changes in the future. Further to this, connections can be formed by being an inclusive and collaborative leader, meaning that others are valued for their unique selves (Durie, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, all kaiako can advocate for emotionally safe climates in educational settings, which will support kaiako to develop into confident and capable leaders. A way to empower kaiako to lead the way is to develop the three dispositions discussed, which are contribution, resilience and connection. By applying these dispositions practically in an educational environment, kaiako begin to grow in their self-efficacy around emotional awareness for themselves and for others, which will then help them advocate for an emotionally safe climate. Kaiako will understand what emotional safety looks like and how they can become a responsible participant in maintaining this, which supports how kaiako can be responsive to their own and others wellness within a space.

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